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## Ethics and affects: A critique of social intelligibility with Adorno, Butler and Spivak

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ETHICS AND AFFECTS: A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL INTELLIGIBILITY WITH  
ADORNO, BUTLER AND SPIVAK

A Thesis Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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BY

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for Robert and Penny

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## Abstract

### *Ethics and affects: a critique of social intelligibility with Adorno, Butler and Spivak*

In *Ethics and affects: a critique of social intelligibility with Adorno, Butler and Spivak* I offer a critical analysis that can help to disentangle the reliance of social *legitimacy* on social *intelligibility*. I maintain that legitimacy and intelligibility are woven into a kind of double-bind, wherein the *illegitimacy* of some social identities contributes to a continued *unintelligibility* of some experiences, while that *unintelligibility* in turn works to preclude legitimacy. There is thus an injustice, or at least something rather like an injustice, to the ways social intelligibility and social legitimacy are entangled. The central argument here is that critique that best serves to disentangle social legitimacy and social intelligibility is affectively invested critique.

I develop an account of affectively invested critique by drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Theodor Adorno, and Gayatri Spivak, making three arguments that allow me to use their works together productively. First, I show how each of these thinkers arranges their method of critique such that the social-political production of epistemic blindspots can be exposed for critical reflection. Next, I maintain that ethically-informed critique should engage with a notion of the human being who is not transparent to himself, and questions of value must be brought into conversation with a historically grounded analysis of social-political power. Finally, I suggest that by writing affective comportments into their work these thinkers produce stronger arguments in favor of social justice. I thus examine how these thinkers are able to use affect to make meaning that “sticks” more effectively.

I conclude by claiming that ethical, social, political philosophy should resist prescribing in advance the proper or correct ethical actions in favor of articulating the conditions under which a nuanced critique could occur, one attentive to the concerns of social context and power operations, and this applies also to the one who theorizes. My intention is that thinking through the affects that attend political sensibilities and understanding them as socially constituted judgments can help to reconfigure customary impasses so that affectively different readings of social life can flourish.

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# Ethics and affects: a critique of social intelligibility with Adorno, Butler and Spivak

## Introduction

The motivating force of my dissertation project is to offer a critical analysis that can help to disentangle the reliance of social *legitimacy* on social *intelligibility*. In what follows here, I call attention to the way that some non-normative or marginalized subjects have articulated the ethically, politically, and socially conditioned demands that they legitimate themselves. I argue that interrogating the logic of those demands exposes a need to philosophically rethink not just the dependence of social legitimacy on a pre-established social intelligibility, but the terms by which both legitimacy and intelligibility are subtended. To explain this problem, I turn now to two short texts, some of the earliest that clarified this problem for me. Both of the works I appeal to here come from popular media—one is a blog post, the other a book review—although both are written by theorists. I present these pieces as vignettes that situate the concerns of my dissertation project.

### Unintelligibility and legitimacy (1) Dean Spade

Dean Spade is an activist, lawyer, and legal scholar who both identifies as trans and works closely with trans communities. His analyses, both in his academic and popular writing of his experiences as a scholar, have called me to consider the stakes of the interrelation of legitimacy and intelligibility in terms of how *dehumanization* is produced through operations of normativity. On his blog, he has discussed being called upon in



his academic work to include a “trans primer,” ostensibly so that the implied reader<sup>1</sup> of law journals can “understand” trans people (Spade “Rant”). This frustrates Spade, since he knows that there are varieties of what might be called epistemic blindspots that actively impede knowledge of trans identities, blindspots that cannot be eliminated through the simple act of providing information.<sup>2</sup> Trans people are presumably so different, so foreign, and the ignorance of “their” lives presumably so ubiquitous, primers must be provided before anything can be thought, theorized, or critiqued about the oppressions that trans people encounter. However, what Spade has realized is that if the demand for such a primer is fulfilled, the blindspot is systematically recreated, and he is continually called upon to repeat the *same* basic information about what it “means” to be trans.<sup>3</sup> According to Spade, this occurs because “[p]eople need to understand if/why trans people are human”(Spade “Rant”). He notes that most inquiries into trans

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this term from Gayatri Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) x. “Preface”

<sup>2</sup> The language of a “blindspot” for trans experiences is developed in Julia Serano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007) 77-93. The idea that epistemological blocks subtend the social oppression of some subjects and the social privilege of others has a long history in feminist scholarship; see for instance Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985), Peggy McIntosh, White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies, 1988, Linda Martín Alcoff, “On Judging Epistemic Credibility: Is Social Identity Relevant?,” Engendering Rationalities, eds. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), Judith Butler, Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (London: Verso, 2009). This idea has also been fruitfully used in anti-racist philosophy; see Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler makes a similar point in an early essay that reflected her ambivalence toward the categories lesbian and gay, noting “It is one thing to be erased from discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as an abiding falsehood. Hence, there is a political imperative to render lesbianism visible, but how is this to be done outside or through existing regulatory regimes?” Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 312.

experiences get framed not in terms of what a particular discrimination entails, but rather in terms of questioning *why* trans people exist, *what they are*, and *why* they are that way. Capitulating to the latter questions confines trans people, according to Spade, to “defending our very existence, participating in the assumption that we are strange, unusual, interesting, and, ultimately, that our humanity has to be proven and defended”(Spade "Rant"). Trans people, then, remain problematic objects upon whom “humanity” can be bestowed or denied by a larger, non-trans society, and Spade has recognized that under the terms of intelligibility within legitimated knowledge pertaining to law, he cannot *just explain himself*.

This is what I am thinking of when I write that social legitimacy relies on a pre-established social intelligibility: before a question of the rights of trans subjects before the law can be engaged, “those” trans people need to be explained. But, when the explanation fails, and fails again, an engagement with the specificities of trans critiques of the law is continually deferred. And so legitimacy and intelligibility remain woven into a kind of double-bind, wherein the *illegitimacy* of trans identity contributes to a continued *unintelligibility* of these experiences, while that *unintelligibility* in turn works to preclude legitimacy. Spade responds to this problem in a productive insight, noting, “I feel like I’m engaged in a resistant practice of refused transparency and reduction of myself to the level of the ‘human,’ but I’m not entirely sure what that means yet, or what all of its costs will be”(Spade "Rant").

If Spade is interpolated to prove himself not just as a legitimate academic, lawyer, or activist, but as a legitimate *human being*, if the ways in which some people live are not *human* ways, some identities are not true *human* possibilities, then *human* does not function as a neutral epistemological category. After the primers are written, the

article is accepted, and the documentaries are filmed about trans identity (not to mention the abundant historical examples of gender transgressive people of all kinds), the idea *human* still has not opened up to embrace trans people. Instead, humanity remains a category that is not attributed to everyone who just ‘happens to be human.’<sup>4</sup> Rather than articulate a need to broaden that category so that it might also include trans people, he instead opens up a critique of the demands for transparency, or reduction of oneself to a universal as such. That is, Spade frames being human not as something that he, a marginalized subject, should strive to attain, but rather, as a limit by which he should not be bound. Responding to how trans lives have been rendered illegitimate and unintelligible, Spade thus argues that he should not have to be the one to continually bear the burden of proof, to do the work of constantly working to *display* his humanity. Instead, he suggests that the best course of action might be to contest the primacy of the idea of the human in general as the basis for thinking trans oppressions.<sup>5</sup>

#### Unintelligibility and legitimacy (2) Riki Wilchins

“Accept Me, I Hurt,” is not an argument. It’s a plea. Riki Wilchins titled a 1997 Lambda book review “Accept Me, I Hurt” to mark her frustration with the ways that the experiences of trans people were appearing in popular literature. Along with Spade, she also notes a trend regarding the requirements for social intelligibility imposed on gender non-conforming subjects, and her analysis highlights the way that

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<sup>4</sup> This is an example of a liberal platitude that accounts for difference by disclaiming its importance. I am trying to show that such a move displaces, rather than incorporates, difference.

<sup>5</sup> For further analysis, see Spade’s recently published book on trans identities, law and biopower. Dean Spade, Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law. (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011).

affect is entangled with the problem of legitimacy and intelligibility. She states, “It is increasingly difficult to find an audience eager, or at least willing, to critically engage the arguments one wants to make, let alone the life experiences which produce them without showing them before and after pictures of your genitals, your bruises, or both” (Wilchins 36). Wilchins portrays the tendency to objectify trans people by reducing trans lives to trans bodies, particularly to bodies conceived of only with regard to sex reassignment surgery.<sup>6</sup> Further, she acknowledges that there seems to be an expectation that the privilege to talk about the experiences of trans people may only be purchased through the *pity* invoked when witnessing suffering, here a specifically cissexual pity for trans “otherness.”<sup>7</sup> Here, I take on Wilchins’ critique as a cautionary limit for the use of suffering to contest the logics that govern social intelligibility, particularly as that intelligibility is mediated by affective experiences on ‘both sides.’ At the same time I will argue that being able to engage one’s own and others’ pain in a complicated and embodied fashion facilitates a better critique of how social legitimacy depends on social intelligibility. Being able to invoke pain strengthens a claim that someone’s experiences have been misrepresented or misused, that marginalized experiences have been co-opted by dominant discourses, or that one has engaged in

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<sup>6</sup> The fascination with SRS has been well-critiqued by trans activists and theorists; see Serano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. Especially 35-64.

<sup>7</sup> *Cissexual* is a term that has come into fairly common use within queer and trans communities and scholarship. It describes someone who does not identify as transsexual or transgender. Conceptually, its use seeks to trouble the status of non-trans as natural and normal, and so not needing to be marked or designated. The most notable academic use of the term is in Serano, especially 161-194. When representing someone who identifies outside of the gender binary, or when trying for gender neutrality, I use the gender-neutral pronouns sie and hir in place of she/he or him/her and hirself in place of herself or himself because gender-neutral pronouns disrupt the easy assumption that all human are easily categorized into “female” or “male.” In this I follow Spade; see Dean Spade, “Resisting Medicine, Re/Modeling Gender,” Berkeley Women's Law Journal 18.15 (2003).17.

unethical speaking for another.<sup>8</sup> Engaging the emotional dimensions of human experience is crucial for thinking through instances of internalized oppression or horizontal hostility.<sup>9</sup> In short, without the ability to represent the *feelings* that attend to exclusion or oppression, the *somatic* experiences of pain and violence, the *frustration* and *anger* that accompanies the loss of political, social, and personal possibilities, the ability to bring to bear important critiques is lost.

However, it is essential to develop a framework that can articulate a complicated relationship between thought and affective experiences, one that especially attends to certain critical concerns regarding power. As is exemplified in Wilchins' analysis noted above, insofar as that a theoretical apparatus requires the suffering of the excluded in

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<sup>8</sup> My concerns regarding misuse, misrepresentation, and cooptation are informed by anti-racist, feminist analysis. Angela Davis, for instance, argued that U.S. Multiculturalism functions to contain differences if it allows an uncritical idea of promoting diversity to distract from confronting and trying to dismantle racism, sexism, homophobia, worker exploitation, etc. Multiculturalism co-opts differences when it focuses on the general populations' ability to consume knowledge about or representations of cultural or racial differences rather than trying to draw attention to inequalities that fall along lines of social differences. Angela Davis, "Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking 'Race' Politics," Mapping Multi-Culturalism, eds. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 40. See also María Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), Gloria Anzaldúa, Borlderlands/La Frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, "Introduction," This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983). On 'speaking for' see Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood, eds. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner (New York: New York University Press, 1994). For a particularly insightful and nuanced discussion of intersecting oppressions, see Eli Clare, Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> I am gesturing here to the negative feelings that can result from unjust social systems that are directed inward or toward other members of oppressed groups, which results in what Suzanne Pharr calls "scrabbling for crumbs at the bottom," competing for resources perceived as scarce with others who are similarly disempowered by a social, political and economic hierarchy in a way that prevents an intersectional understanding of social differences and/or political solidarity. See Suzanne Pharr, In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation (Berkeley: Chardon Press, 1996) 11-38.

order to recognize excluded subjects as legitimate human beings, or to the extent that the invocation of suffering objectifies oppressed or marginalized subjects as merely victims, pointing to pain misfires. Calls to redress the suffering of others are then taken up through calls for tolerance or respect which reveal themselves to be not only *hypocritical*, because they replace an engagement with exclusionary logics and powers with the superficial appearance of acceptance, but *disingenuous*, as they in fact prevent the appearance of a problem, covering over a blindspot with the veneer of ethical respectability, with the idea that the problem is being “handled.” This criticism is corroborated by Wilchins’ analysis: the trans representations Wilchins was critiquing in her review were overwhelmingly modeled after a certain kind of LGBT literature she considers not sufficiently radical to contest the structural oppressions experienced by subjects who are non-conforming with regard to gender and sexually. In her view, these LGBT narratives appealed to their readers for “understanding and tolerance” without actively confronting “the kind of covertly homophobic reader who would require such pleading in the first place” (Wilchins 36). Wilchins summarizes the problem by noting that “In the trans community, we are now expected to bare our wounds as the road to accumulating the moral capital which will win legitimacy...[W]e write for audiences who find it easier to use their hearts than their heads; indeed, it is far easier to relate to the experiences of one’s life than to undertake an analysis of what happened and what it means” (Wilchins 36). While it is conceivable that one could do both, Wilchins’ observation shows that trying to tug on the heart strings of a presumed cissexual or heterosexual reader by presenting oneself as a virtuous victim does not *sufficiently* challenge the gender privilege of a general social structure or an individual. It instead runs the risk of capitulating to those privileges, offering up a sympathetic

trans object upon whom care and concern can be shown by a tolerant, liberal subject, one who need not examine his own complicity in the very logics of gender that render trans lives as strange or foreign. Further, Wilchins is noting an expectation that trans subjects must purchase a moral legitimacy *through* their wounds, that the only legitimacy a trans voice should carry is due to that person's pain. This suggests that even if one does expose one's suffering, there is little hope that this will suffice for inaugurating and sustaining a critique of trans oppression, as long as trans lives are systematically rendered unintelligible from the perspective of legitimated discourses.

### Unintelligibility and legitimacy (3) Adorno, Butler, Spivak

In the vignettes I set out above, similar concerns circulate: that a confusing, different, non-normative subject is continually met with the ethical, social, and political demand to present himself as an object for scrutiny that can be understood and legitimated in one sweeping gesture. These concerns compelled me to turn to the work of Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Through the readings of their work I offer below, I argue that ethical, political, social critique, attentive to affect and power, can engender new ways to frame those figurations that continually render "different" people *different* in the first place. For me, this opens up onto the question not of whether social intelligibility itself is desirable or not, but how it becomes desirable or not in particular cases and for particular subjects. Following this question leads me to claim that affect is an indispensable level of analysis for critical philosophy. How affects are employed, manipulated, how they help structure appearances, how affective burdens are shifted—all of this must be part of how we follow up on the question of the ethical, social and political stakes of how we appear to each other. Such analysis will best

support critique that resists and contests the negative effects on those ‘unintelligible’ subjects—violence, marginalization, the demand to conform, submit, and acclimate. I suggest here that the desire to contest the negative effects that are explored by Spade and Wilchins above is not simply an ethical demand in the traditional sense, concerned with the actions and decisions of individuals. It is also a theoretical need of great importance. My contention is that theory should read back and forth between ethical, social and political life and philosophical and theoretical engagements, and that it must do so critically, rather than in naïve or reactionary ways, as was modeled in the texts with which I began.

There are three dimensions to the thinking of Adorno, Butler and Spivak which allow me to read them together productively and to support the central claim of my dissertation, namely, that critique that best serves to disentangle social legitimacy and social intelligibility is *affectively invested* critique. I have structured my chapters around these three related arguments. First, I argue that each of them has crafted a methodology that engages the aspects of human experiences that are not fully cognitive, completely transparent to thought, totally understood, and/or “rational” in the traditional or strictest sense. This is often, but not only, marked by a need to think the corporeal or somatic aspects of human life, those marked by pains, pleasures, and their ambivalent combinations. I thus start each chapter by trying to parse how each of these figures arranges their methodology such that the social-political production of epistemic blindspots can be exposed for critical reflection.

Second, I maintain that such a ‘non-cognitive’ element plays a crucial role in ethical thinking. I will show, perhaps paradoxically, that ethical thinking should engage with a notion of the human being who is not transparent to himself; and also that it is



essential to consider the ‘blindspots’ that are constitutive of any ethical thinking, which requires that ethical thought must be brought into conversation with a historically grounded analysis of social-political power. I claim here that there is a particular need for critical philosophies to engage with ethical thinking, as any critical thought must be able to account for the end toward which it thinks. “Ethics” can be what gets the *ought* on the table, what pushes beyond the negativity of critique. Thinking through ethical questions, especially the pitfalls that arise when one wishes to think through moral judgments, allows one to better resist the ways that intelligibility and legitimacy are unevenly bestowed upon the subjects of social-political judgments. Ethical thought can be that space in which the expedient or the pragmatic are set aside in favor of dealing with the difficult question of what is right. My readings of Adorno, Butler and Spivak allow me to argue that questions of ethics and questions of power should be thought together, to help weave together the fabric of a critical philosophy.

Third, I suggest that philosophical projects seeking to intervene in the fraught relationship between legitimacy and intelligibility should engage affectively-informed critiques. One thing I am interested in is the effect of affective critique—I suggest that by writing affective comportments into their work these thinkers can produce stronger arguments in favor of social justice. What kinds of methods help us hold together in a critical philosophical analysis more strands of life than we previously had? More strands, even, than we thought was possible, or likely? There is an exigent need to do a better job of holding these strands together in some pattern, as it is easy to drop off marginalized concerns because they are difficult, or unseemly, or their demands seem excessive, or unreasonable, or cost too much, or want the wrong things. Here I look to how these texts are able to use affect to make meaning that “sticks” more effectively.

In the concluding chapter of my dissertation, I reflect more broadly on the fruits of mobilizing affect in philosophical critique and situate my own interest in critical affects within other feminist and queer analysis. I offer a reading of Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. In that text, Ahmed she suggests that we should conceive of emotion in philosophical analysis not as something one possesses, or as an attribute that belongs to a subject, but in terms of affective economies. This allows for a clearer theoretical account of how the deployment of emotions serves ethical, social and political normativity. If it is already presumed that affect is part of the constitution of social-political meaning, and if a framework for confronting common blockages and impasses can be mobilized, then hopefully different perspectives can be brought to bear on the "culture wars." "Critique" as I use it here is a kind of undoing, in thought, of sedimented structures. I want to suggest that the affect-attentive critical philosophy I've been advocating for can help set ourselves up to think well the political problems that need thinking, particularly around the tired political frameworks that reappear whenever an important issue is raised, and in terms of the dominant idioms and caricatures of mainstream liberal and conservative politics. I argue that thinking through the affects that attend political sensibilities and understanding them as socially constituted judgments reconfigures these impasses so that affectively different readings of social life can flourish.

## Chapter One: Judith Butler and the normative force of affective difference

### Introduction

In this chapter I draw on three of Butler's most recent texts, *Undoing Gender*, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and *Frames of War*, to help develop my contribution to ethical, social, political critique. I suggest that because these texts display a methodological approach that actively engages the ways normativity functions from within a critique of pressing historical events, Butler's analysis is able to engage ethical concerns while remaining critical of the normative power of something like "ethics." I will pay particular attention to *Frames of War*, in which Butler situates her project within a nexus or interrelation of affect, ethics, epistemology, politics, power, and ontology. This text contains five essays, each of which seeks to critique "...cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence" (Butler *Frames* 1). The implications of this analysis apply to war, specifically "on why or how it becomes easier, or more difficult, to wage war" (Butler *Frames* 2). The concern of *Frames* then is to offer an analysis of war in the hopes of mitigating the effects of its violence, and she accomplishes this through the critique of social ontologies. This method attends to a kind of circularity that is important for critical analysis: a critique which, because anything that appears to be a judgment is already based upon categories, ideas of subjectivity, and defined terms that are themselves normatively determined with regard to particular, concrete histories, must interrogate the frames that structure the appearance of the things taken for granted. Of particular concern for Butler here is

the question of who appears as a human whose life should be protected, and who does not.

Butler's critical intervention is framed in terms of social identities and the normative constructions of sex, gender and sexuality. Before presenting my readings of Butler's recent work, which addresses a breadth of concerns, I want to situate her project in an approach to feminist and queer theory that has a few generalizable theoretical suppositions. This is not to propose that there is a homogeneity of methodology or concern among queer and/or gender theorists. However, I do want to suggest that there are some basic claims that the theorists I tend to draw on hold in common, even if these ideas are caught up in ongoing debates about how best to flesh them out. The most general articulation of these suppositions with regard to sex, gender and sexuality (which I address in more detail below) assert that the meaning of one's social identity always depends on context.<sup>1</sup> While it may seem that one's racial or gender identity, for example, is obvious, "there" for any and all to see, it should be argued that the *significance* of social identities is highly variable, changing based on

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<sup>1</sup> Coming from another philosophical tradition, Linda Martín Alcoff explains the importance of context quite well in her conceptual account of social location, arguing that one's social location is the relationship between one's identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, etc.) and one's social context (includes the overarching norms and privileges with society, any particular norms in one's immediate settings, as well as one's physical location in terms of nation, neighborhood, and even position within a building). Thus, social location is always relational, not something "true" about a person. Further, for Alcoff, social identity must be thought about in relationship to privilege, which entails "...to be in a more favorable, mobile, and dominant position vis-à-vis the structures of power/knowledge in a society." This entails not just that the experience of privilege changes given one's social identity (one's race, class gender, etc.), but that social identity itself must be understood to vary in how it bears on social privilege, given different physical and social locations, as well as the intersectional nature of social identity. See Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*, eds. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner (New York: New York University Press, 1994) 307.

social and historical location, self-understanding, and the intersectional quality of the categories used to describe social identities. Taken generally, an intersectional approach understands that social categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and class, bear on and inform each other, and consequently guards against an assumed homogeneity of the members of identity groups. That is, understanding the meaning of any particular aspect of social identity requires an analysis of how other aspects affect it: any one with a race also has a gender, no disabled person is without a class affiliation, no one has a sexuality but not an ethnicity, etc. This differentiation must be accounted for by critical engagements with normativity.<sup>2</sup>

The following three methodological suppositions are compatible with this insight but are thought more specifically in terms of sex and gender, even though any

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<sup>2</sup> I have tried here to sketch in very broad strokes what I take to be a common concern of the social theorists I draw on, but the methodological heritage and legacy of intersectionality is still being decided. I personally developed my usage of it from reading the works of women of color feminism from the early 1980's that was interested in thinking through the relevance for feminist theory of how sexuality, race and gender affect each other in terms of feminist solidarity and resisting social oppressions. This work, much of it published by Kitchen Table Press, wanted to give voice to the particularities of women of color, many who identified as lesbians, and to exert a critical force on the more mainstream feminist movement that was exclusive of the insights of these thinkers and activists. See Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., This Bridge Called My Back (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). There are many other ways to think this through; Ladelle McWhorter, for example, has been engaging the question of whether or not intersectional analysis should describe interlocking systems of oppression or intersecting identity categories. On her analysis, if it is the former, that leads only to the ability to point to and possibly contest particular instances of racism or sexism, for instance the racism of the feminist movement, while the latter requires a genealogy of institutional and discursive practices that shows a commonality as to how these identity categories were historically instituted and continue to function. See Ladelle McWhorter, "Sex, Race and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy," Hypatia 19.3 (2004): 55. Provisionally accepting McWhorter's distinction, at this moment it seems to me unclear that one of those projects is more efficacious than the other. The methodology that points to how a concern with only a single aspect of identity formation silences others is just as necessary as a methodology that engages institutional power; I see no reason not to think them together.

analysis along these lines will be contextual and include the aspects of social identity to which I gestured above. First, gender relates to bodies, but is not reducible to them, and so the sex-gender distinction is not unambiguous. That is, gender does not equate to or derive from one's bodily sex. While gender marks, at least in part, a relationship to one's body, gender expression is a *negotiation* with one's experience of embodiment, the sense of how one exists in one's body, and so gender is *active*.<sup>3</sup> The commonly assumed gendered ways of being, "masculinity" and "femininity," are not the simple expressions of natural qualities or characteristics already found in people who "are" male or female, and so masculinity is not "stuff 'men' do," femininity is not "stuff 'women' do."<sup>4</sup> This kind of analysis troubles, to use a term made common through Butler's work, any clear nature-nurture distinction, putting an emphasis on creative construction in its place. Second, a critical perspective that emerges from such an analysis of performative gendered and sexed identities is that gender should not be understood as *binary*. Any traditional assignment of qualities—if men are *strong* then women are *weak*, if men are *active* then women are *passive*, and so on—should be rejected, as such a logic of othering works by setting up oppositions that appear balanced but are in fact occlusions of power

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<sup>3</sup> On the active negotiation of Gender, see Eli Clare, Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999) 130. Pointing out that it is difficult to account for any "authentic" relationship to one's gender, Clare writes, "Butch, Nellie, studly, king, androgynous, queen: how have we negotiated the lies and thievery, the ways gender is influenced by divisions of labor, by images of masculinity and femininity, by racism, sexism, classism, ableism, by the notions of "real" men and "real" women? And how, at the same time, have we listened to our own bodies? For me the answer is not simple."

<sup>4</sup> On biological sex as not determinate of gender, see Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Halberstam's book is concerned with exploring the presumed inauthenticity of female masculinity, and she argues that the constructive, performative nature of gender expression is revealed when masculinity is studied outside of its appropriate place of residence, the white middle class male body.

differentials.<sup>5</sup> So not only does a gender binary not accurately represent the conceptual relationship between the opposed sides of any given binary, such restrictive choices are harmful more generally to the development of gendered identity, and on this analysis, ought not to be used to ‘normalize’ gender.<sup>6</sup> It has been thoroughly established that traditional or socially sanctioned expectations of social identity do not serve everyone equally. That these expectations do not serve in living well, that they support the life choices of only some normatively chosen relationships, sex acts, behaviors, ways of dressing, etc., should be the grounds for a critical upheaval of normative expectations around gender and sexuality. This idea has varied interweaving trajectories: in U.S. women of color feminisms, in transgender theories, in poststructural analyses, in queer theories, in psychoanalytic feminisms, in critical race feminisms, and in countless spaces within and outside of academic and theoretical contexts, people are crafting resistance to normativity and intentional invocations of gender deviance. In light of these ongoing negotiations, I suggest a third supposition: such theories of gender allow for “bodily sex,” “gender identity” or “gender expression,” and “sexuality” or “sexual identity,” to be seen as interconnected yet analytically separable phenomenon. In terms of lived

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<sup>5</sup> An articulation of sex in terms of the concept of the other is offered by Simone de Beauvoir, who argued, “The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Knopf, 1964) xxxviii. Franz Fanon made a compatible point with regard to race in a colonial context; see Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> I address the idea of normalization in Butler and how a critique of normativity can serve ethical resistance to the negative effects of normalization in Section One below.

experience, they occur together, but they are not *reducible* to each other.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, a social phenomena like “gaydar” is not theoretically defensible from the perspective I am articulating, even though in certain cases it might “work.” That is, thinking one can infer the *sexual* identity of someone based on *what one thinks one knows* about hir gender expression or presentation is a reduction of one of these terms to another, and thus ethically murky and analytically indefensible.<sup>8</sup> But also, thinking you can ascribe a *sexed* identity to someone based on *what you think you know* about hir gender expression or performance is similarly problematic. *Both* capitulate to a thinking of gender that subscribes to a binary logic. Both gestures intrude upon someone’s “interiority” in indefensible ways. Again, one’s sexed body, gender expression, and sexual identity are understood as interrelated with each other and with other categories of social identity, but it is necessary to avoid *collapsing* these categories.

It is from this context of gender and sex analysis that I turn to Butler’s work, seeking ways in which critical philosophy can serve affectively-attentive ethical, social, political critique. Here, I examine Butler’s analysis of how livable and grievable lives are produced through normative framing. The critique of such norms allows for less-violent and less-coercive treatments of human diversity, treatments that maintain an awareness of each of our embodied immersion in and complicity with violence. To accomplish this, I turn to Butler’s treatment of the conditions for ethical responsiveness given the social power of normativity. How can critique be inaugurated at the seeming

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<sup>7</sup> For a nuanced analysis of this that is sensitive to trans identifications, see Julia Serano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> For a quick analysis of the *ethical* problem of a gendered misidentification in terms of pronoun usage with trans-identified people, see Dean Spade, "Once More...With Feeling," From the inside Out, ed. Morty Diamond (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2004).



paucity of anger for “justified” deaths presented as the status quo under conditions of war? If it comes at all, what do we do with the rage, the depression, the anxiety that attends how utterly unjustifiable such violence feels? Ethical responsiveness to violence, on this thinking, is not about duty or about inhabiting the legitimate, appropriate, or acceptable responses to wars; it is not about feeling pity or tolerance or guilt. It is instead about challenging oneself to remain ethically responsive while retaining a relationship to social critique, one that does not substitute feeling or emotions for critique, or acceptable social norms for emotions either. In my reading of Butler, I will be setting out methods for cultivating ethical acts in the midst of one’s responsiveness. Such a method would not necessarily disallow affectively saturated acts such as yelling, complaining, and generally mouthing off about how depressing, sad, or stupid things are. But it would call for maintaining a critical relationship with social critique that thinks the larger frame, the structural analysis of power, in the midst of affectively interpreting the meaning of how an awareness of suffering or violence comes to us.

In section one below, “Normativity and intelligibility,” I first draw on *Undoing Gender* to show how, for Butler, unintelligible identities can be produced through the normative work of rendering intelligible and legitimate some people’s lives. She argues that social norms, as operations of power, produce uncanny, strange, and different subjects as unknowable, unthinkable, or impossible. In *Frames of War*, she develops the language of *apprehension* to best describe a kind of knowing that can help contest the negative effects of such normalizing judgments. I will claim that apprehension, a kind of cognition that is not derived from norms of recognition, but is rather inaugurated through their breakages, can contribute to critical philosophy. In section two, “Ethics

as social critique,” I engage with the question of livability in Butler’s ethical analyses in *Frames of War* and *Undoing Gender*, suggesting that Butler’s idea of *livable life* is a critical concept that carries an ethical force, calling for engaged critique that can resist the ways that precarity is produced through the differential allocation of social and political support for life. I will also suggest that my earlier treatment of how apprehension can facilitate critique should be augmented by a consideration of the ways in which individuals find themselves entwined on a subjective, psychic level with the social world. I thus draw on Butler’s insistence on the opacity and fallibility of human subjects to complicate the meaning of the ethical, to argue that there is an ethical dimension to thinking the psychic effects of not just social norms, but also the critique of social norms. Although no one is capable of entirely recuperating the social conditions that give rise to their own subjectivities and judgments (any more than anyone can reconstruct the entire historical determinations of a present moment) this only complicates, rather than invalidates, the obligation to engage critically with social normativity. In section three, “Framing as affective critique,” I engage with Butler’s ideas about the possible “claims” of non-violence as an affectively grounded way of thinking ethical-political-social theory. On her analysis, attending to a call of non-violence cultivates an orientation toward ethical responsiveness even while one wades through the morass of contemporary political life. If violence is diffuse and insidious, then Butler’s affectively attentive non-violence, a non-violence that does not discount feeling bad, aggressive, anxious, ambivalent, or depressed, seems a productive stance from which to rethink social critique. Her analysis suggests that by recognizing, honoring, owning the so-called “negative” affects that can emerge while struggling to

think differently about the normative frames at work in the world and on oneself, one better contributes to the rigorous critique of suffering under conditions of modern war.

### Section one: normativity and intelligibility

Judith Butler has argued throughout her work that “the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means,” by which non-normative sexual and gender practices are rejected from acceptable mainstream life while “[t]hese excluded sites come to bound the ‘human’ as its constitutive outside and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation” (Butler *Bodies* 8). Her engagements with gender have always been situated within a concern for the mechanisms that postulate some bodies as *less* than others, and her analysis has continually insisted that the critique of gender norms be recognized as having what she comes to call in *Frames of War* ‘social ontological’ ramifications. In this section, I will begin to lay out some of the methodological tenets of Butler’s work that help describe the ways unintelligible identities can be produced through operations of power and the ethical, political and social repercussions of this for non-normative subjects.

For instance, in order to develop an account of how legible gender is a critical access point to legible humanity, Butler situates the project of *Bodies That Matter* in light of the concern that bodies are a perennial problem for philosophers; because of the abstraction of theory, corporeal and material bodies are difficult to account for (Butler *Bodies* ix). Reflecting on the publication and reception of the earlier *Gender Trouble*, she clarifies the basic premises of her work, that bodies are constructed and that gender is performative. Butler’s claim that sexed bodies are *constructed* indicates that no abstract

system could produce certain knowledge about what any body or “the body” *is*. Bodies are always interpreted through various norms and systems of meaning, the norms of gender in a privileged sense. This is a stronger claim than the idea that bodies cannot be known as they “*really are*.” It is also the case on this analysis that bodies *really are* what they are constructed as. On her view then, one should avoid postulating that there is a “body” outside of what can be interacted with. The category *sex* thus works normatively: it is an “ideal construct” that is coercively imposed on bodies, never fully realized but not any less forceful because of that. Her second methodological premise, gender is performative, implies that what is invoked by the category *gender*, usually understood as acting feminine or acting masculine, is neither natural nor innate to bodies, but is instead produced through the acting out and repetition of norms of gendered behavior, as well as deviations from those norms. On this view, gendered activities include how we wear our hair, how we walk, the intonations of one’s voice, how we kiss: all the aspects of how one acts through one’s body and how those acts are understood, interpreted, and related to by others.

That a normative aspect of identity can be pointed out or discussed does not require that everyone be a certain way, or that any one person completely embody that norm. It is normative, for instance, to be expected to identify as heterosexual, but that neither entails that everyone is heterosexual, or that heterosexual people are all particularly “normal.” As the poet and author Audre Lorde puts it, norms are a bit *mythical*. The norms of a given cultural context name the kinds of identities that are most dominant, those that have the easiest access to social power, but “...each one of us knows within our hearts ‘that is not me,’” (Lorde 116). A norm is thus a regulative expectation rather than a concrete determination. However, these regulative

expectations have serious effects for non-normative subjects, as having a gender acts as a precondition for appearing as a legitimate social-political subject. When someone is not “properly gendered,” it is not just their gender, but also their humanity that can be called into question, as gender is an example of a kind of normative expectation that affords differential access to the ‘status’ *human* (Butler *Bodies* 8). For example, calling a baby a boy because their hir is indicated as “male” on hir birth certificate is neither simple nor clear-cut.<sup>9</sup> The gendering of the child, ‘girling of the girl’ or ‘boying of the boy’ as Butler puts it, is not a one-time thing. Throughout the course of a child’s life, the constructed and performative norms of gender function coercively, but they are also quite unstable. Femininity or masculinity can often stretch out and incorporate resistance into its expectations. Sometimes, however, it cannot: one is then a not-good-enough boy, or a failed girl, and that failure also helps prop up the meaning of normative gender, by highlighting a negative determination. Only then do we find out that boys *do not* dress up as Daphne for Halloween. And they do not paint their toenails *pink*. Or so one might think, based on some of the times that non-normative boy activities have appeared in the news over the past year or so. These two allusions to non-normative gender going viral highlight something intriguing about the way that normativity works. Those normative claims had to be made because some boy child had done precisely those things in the course of negotiating the expectations of his gender.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, according to the Intersex Society of North America, “If you ask experts at medical centers how often a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in, the number comes out to about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births.” For more information on the prevalence various Intersex conditions, see ISNA’s website: <http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency>.

<sup>10</sup> In this first case, a little boy went to his school Halloween parade dressed as Daphne from Scooby Doo, his mother blogged about it, and the story was picked up by other bloggers as well as the mainstream news; the original post can be found here: <http://nerdyapple.com/my-son-is-gay/>. In the second case, an image was posted on the

The open-ended negotiation of a normative ideal is part of what produces the set of particular, historical expectations that constitute normative gender. So, in some social and historical contexts, if a little girl comes to understand herself as a soldier, or a doctor, or a lesbian, or a husband, she risks not being recognized as truly *human*. Dehumanization of this sort can entail political marginalization, social exclusion, violence, or even sometimes death. The result can be as commonly recognizable as legal prohibitions against gay marriage, or as rarely recognized as the uneasiness or fear that gender-nonconforming subjects can feel in gender-segregated public washrooms.<sup>11</sup>

Butler's ethical concern is with the ability of non-normatively gendered subjects to be able to live out their lives well, supported in their variety. Thus, *Bodies That Matter* is largely concerned with setting out a conceptual language that can engage the logic of norms at work in the construction of gender, and this coercive, yet simultaneously unstable, structure of normativity is attended to throughout her work. It perhaps begins in an analysis of sexual and gendered identities, but is not limited to that analysis, as will be detailed in my engagement with the work Butler has produced more recently, especially in her 2009 publication *Frames of War*. For Butler, within a given social-political context only some lives are normatively constructed, or in the language of this text, *framed*, as *grievable*. The analysis in *Frames* follows up the briefer, impassioned critiques of *Precarious Life*, which she published in direct response to the

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J Crew site of a mother with her son, who has pink painted toenails; this is lamented by some commentators as signifying the decline of the stable gender identities that children need; see how this is covered by Fox News here: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/04/11/jcrew-ad-showing-boy-pink-nail-polish-sparks-debate-gender-identity/>.

<sup>11</sup> Such uneasiness is discussed in a number of texts; see for instance Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. 20-29. The Silvia Rivera Law Project is an excellent resource for understanding this as a political and social issue, and has produced a short documentary film *Toilet Training* that takes this up; see their website <http://srlp.org/>.

violence in New York on September 11, 2001, and its after-effects; she describes her project as follows:

In *Precarious Life*, I considered the question of what it means to become ethically responsive, to consider and attend to the suffering of others, and, more generally, of which frames permit for the representability of the human and which do not. Such an inquiry seems important not only to knowing how we might respond effectively to suffering at a distance, but also to formulating a set of precepts to safeguard lives in their fragility and precariousness. In this context, I am not asking about the purely subjective sources of this kind of responsiveness. Rather, I propose to consider the way in which suffering is presented to us, and how that presentation affects our responsiveness. In particular, I want to understand how the frames that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with broader norms that determine what will and will not be a grievable life. My point, which is hardly new but bears repeating, is that whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established. This field of perceptible reality is one in which the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as the human—a figure of the non-human that negatively determines and potentially unsettles the recognizably human. (Butler *Frames* 63-64)

In both of these texts, Butler concerns herself not simply with a criticism of violence, but a deep interrogation into how social, political, and moral responses to suffering are conditioned by the frames used to engage the world. On Butler's analysis, these frames work in advance of any kind of judgment or action on the part of an individual, not to *determine* one's reactions, feelings or judgments, but to constitute the meaning and

context for the terms and phrases employed in such responses. Butler indicates that what one might call the ethical desires of her writing include the possibility of responding to the suffering of others as part of the work of building political and social mechanisms for safeguarding lives. For this reason, the possibility of ethical responsiveness is not simply a problem for individuals, as I will discuss further below; instead, the conditions for ethical or moral responses to the suffering of others have social and material determinations. This is why Butler moves to critique the frames that affect how different lives appear in depictions of war. For Butler, to be represented as having a life that ought to be grieved is an indicator of the extent to which a certain population is considered to be human, or certain humans can be said to really have a life. The generality of the ‘said to be had’ is crucial here, as she is speaking not so much to any particular individual’s judgment, but to the likelihood of the success of a given claim, in light of the likely assumptions of a particular social scene.

It is on these terms that she maintains that everyone does not share the same access to being recognized as *human*, stating “The critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?” (Butler *Frames* 51). For Butler, one such thing is the differential allocation of the category *human life*. On this analysis, *humanity* is a kind of status or rank which is subtended in part through the way that exposure to violence is framed, and thoughts and emotions regarding violence are consequently managed. The category *human*, on this analysis, works not as an ideal or a natural fact



but a norm, one whose differential allocation affects the extent to which the precariousness of particular lives can become visible.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the relation between the norm *human* and the potential for apprehending a life as precariousness, Butler insists on an analysis that conceives of ontology as social. This allows her to interrogate the ways in which what appears to be a judgment based on known quantities—for example, that this person here is human—is already based upon categories, ideas of subjectivity, and terms that are themselves normatively determined with regard to particular, concrete histories. Thus, it is not only judgments such as “humans deserve to be protected from violence” that must be subject to critique, but also the categories deployed in such judgments. In the essay, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” Butler drew on the work of Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno to make a terminological distinction that is clarifying here; she notes, “Judgments operate for both thinkers as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves” (Butler “Critique” 213). A judgment, on the terms of this juxtaposition, is more passive than critique, as to make a judgment does not necessarily require the rethinking of the terms through which the judgment is subtended. Critique, however, must interrogate the frames that structure the appearance of taken-for-granted realities, specifically here, in terms of the question of whose life appears as a human life that deserves to be protected, and whose does not (Butler *Frames* 163).

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<sup>12</sup> I say here that a norm is not *natural* because norms, for Butler, are contingent operations of power, neither necessary nor trans-historical. I say it is not an *ideal* as normativity functions through power relations that are not simply evaluative, but are *productive*. See Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Precariousness is thus a historical concept that is simultaneously ethical, social, and political, one which signifies that “life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life” (Butler *Frames* 3, 14). In this analysis, Butler also addresses what she calls precarity, a “more specifically political notion” than the “more or less existential conception” of precariousness (Butler *Frames* 3). Precariousness needs to be recognized as a generalized condition, as any life, including human life, is always dependent on other lives—those of friends, acquaintances, strangers, people who couldn’t even be named as strangers, and lives which wouldn’t necessarily be named human. This dependency is a social-ontological one, and will take forms that cannot be fully named or understood. She writes, “Reciprocally, it [precariousness] implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who ‘we’ are” (Butler *Frames* 14). This ontological interdependency, for Butler, opens up the question of ethical interrelation, and implies the possibility of conceiving of, not discovering, an ethical interdependency among lives. The critical engagement with such an interdependency, however, must always be even more contingently determined; as Butler writes, “...it is the differential allocation of precarity that, in my view, forms the point of departure for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics in ways that continue to exceed and traverse the categories of identity” (Butler *Frames* 3). Because her understanding of ontology is social in character, Butler does not claim that such an interdependency can be unearthed or discovered as natural or necessary. Instead, she wishes to open up the

ethical task of building a productive notion of how to understand such an interdependency and its potential ethical obligations.

Butler suggests that a critique of precarity perhaps should move into an engagement with precariousness because normative construction happens in the background before any frame for a life appears. She wants to critique the terms upon which something like recognition can occur, and so the term "precariousness" is important, because it marks the way in which the social-ontological comes to be sedimented, a marking that is arrived at through a critical engagement with precarity as a contingent operation of power. That is, the analysis of a particular ethical, political and social scene requires moving into the social ontological context of that particularity. She thus writes,

The precarity of life imposes an obligation on us. We have to ask after the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible. ...I want to argue that if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging. (Butler *Frames 2*)

Thus, while Butler's invocation of obligation is thorny, it reflects a position I argue is rather promising in as much as it seeks to negotiate normativity while maintaining a historically specific, critical relationship with normativity's operative logics. The questions that arise in contingent political scenes about rights, for instance, must push beyond simple redistribution into the reconfiguring of the ways in which lives are

structured to appear within that political scene. Butler names the political aspirations of her project quite explicitly in *Frames*, stating "...I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status" (Butler *Frames* 13). The overarching desires of her work are to intervene into particular, uneven distributions of precarity as they effect, e.g., Muslim-Americans, or civilian populations in war zones. However, the methodological goal of her work is not the practical realization of such concrete social policies, but a philosophical question of *critique*. She is careful to point out that the conditions for such an "inclusive and egalitarian recognition" have not arrived and, further, that even under ideal (or at least better) conditions, what is "recognized" under the term precarious will never fully represent any life. This latter point is crucial, as it represents another limit Butler places on her use of social ontology: her intervention into ontological analysis is not meant to imply an exhaustive account of life. Rather, her focus is on exposing and critiquing the frames through which human life appears. The historical construction of an ontological scene is described by Butler in her essay on Foucault's virtue when she writes, "...certain kinds of practices which are designed to handle certain kinds of problems produce, over time, a settled domain of ontology as their consequence, and this ontological domain, in turn, constrains our understanding of what is possible" (Butler "Critique" 216). The qualification of ontology with *social* seeks to limit the scope of her interrogation, to not postulate that there is an irreducible or ahistorical character to what her ontological analysis unearths, but at the same time to use the category of ontology in order to indicate the intractability of a given social scene. Her

use of the language of *ontology* retains a level of analysis that prefigures or conditions in advance any appearance of a frame for life.

In response to such an ontological scene, the critical use of the term “apprehension” is meant to represent an epistemic tool, a kind of knowing, that can register or mark the ontological production of lives, as apprehension attends to the never-complete normative production of unintelligibility. Any exposure to those “lives” which exist outside of one’s immediate communities is conditioned by the frames that present those lives; framing names the terms under which any “life” can be recognized. However, apprehension for Butler “can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. It is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowing” (Butler *Frames* 5). Apprehension, as opposed to understanding or cognition, is a mode of knowing that better facilitates social-ontological critique. Aligning the process of recognition with the work of subsuming a phenomenon under established categories, she states, “We can apprehend, for instance, that something is not recognized by recognition. Indeed, that apprehension can become the basis for a critique of norms of recognition” (Butler *Frames* 5). It thus seems that Butler decides on apprehension as a term because it can help describe the kind of knowing that can take account of something like the work of constitutive exclusion, or the return of something that has been suppressed. Because the stakes of her work concern critiquing the differential, unethical distribution of the conditions that allow for lives to flourish and thrive, questions of how lives are conditioned to appear become central. If part of the logic and power of normativity is that it produces some positions as unthinkable and some lives as unrecognizable, then apprehension, as a way of relating to one’s social ontological scene,

can serve to intervene into the production of others as unintelligible. Apprehension can be an important tool to use for critiquing something like differential exposure to violence, as frames follow the logic of norms: like norms, they are sustained through the performative work of iteration, so it is part of their working that they break apart, fail to fully show what they intend, and like norms, their breakage can be marked (Butler *Frames* 10). For Butler, it is crucial to mark the breaks in the frames that represent human life through the mode of thought she names apprehension. This facilitates critique that will expose the ways some human lives become expendable under conditions of war, while others apparently must be defended at all costs.

## Section two: ethics as social critique

An express engagement with ethical analysis has been common to the work Butler has produced more recently. Ethical concerns were implied in the earlier work, but in *Giving an Account of Oneself* she engages with the field of ethics itself, and in *Undoing Gender* and *Frames of War* she actively uses the language of ethics within her conceptual framework. On my reading, this does not mark a turn to “ethics” and away from social-political analysis so much as a more explicit engagement with the contexts that engender her thinking. For example, the stated project of Butler’s *Undoing Gender* is to relate “the problematics of gender and sexuality to the tasks of persistence and survival” (Butler *Undoing* 4). To accomplish this, her critiques in this book are articulated in terms of what she names “livable life” (Butler *Undoing* 1). Because she contextualizes her engagement with norms within questions of life and survival, the terrain of her analysis has shifted a bit, and she situates herself in the context of not just the current academic engagements with sex and gender, but also with feminist, intersex, trans, and

queer social-political movements. Her invocation of *livability* as a concept that can help integrate an ethical force into the critique of norms has to be attentive to the differential ways that people within all those movements might relate to the notion of stability that is at play in her argument that an *unrecognizable* life is also an *unlivable* one (Butler *Undoing* 8). As she notes,

The task for all of these movements [those I referred to above] seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group, and another way for another group. What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some. The differences in position and desire set the limits to universalizability as an ethical reflex. The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death. (Butler *Undoing* 8)

At stake here is that ethical, social, political theory must be able to travel, as it were, outside of the pages of a text and outside of the assumptions of a discipline to engage those affected by disciplinary claims—this demand is posed by Butler as an ethical demand to support efforts to live, breathe, desire, love; to engage with the political scene and its institutions which *legislate* and the social norms that *proscribe* their ways into lived lives. In this project, I would like to cultivate ways that an ethical force can be engendered along with a critical analysis of how we might each find ourselves situated with regard to an institution like marriage, a concept like femininity, or a medical practice like hormone replacement therapy. Such a force, if critical, would not try to re-legislate or re-proscribe, but instead institute a call for rethinking the ways that such

concepts function. Because people are differentially situated with regard to social and political power, but also because of the plurality of psychic and social positions being occupied, such thinking should expressly resist any move toward the universalization of an ideal (either radical or conservative). Cultivating such a force, one that is neither toothless nor seeks universality, is served by engaging with ethical considerations that are also socially and politically conditioned.

That is, Butler's challenge in *Undoing Gender* is to deploy a notion of normativity that preserves the awareness that norms work through violence and also strives to adjudicate between better and worse norms and the social practices they support. She writes,

...the "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the "I" becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this "I" fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation. (Butler *Undoing* 3-4)

Some I's, some selves, become unknowable from the perspective of dominant norms, and this has ramifications for social, political and ethical critique. Butler speaks from the



perspective of subjects who feels that their flourishing would best take place in some kind of transgression of normativity: what gets risked in such scenarios is the recognizability of oneself as legitimately *human*. This passage reveals a continuity with her concerns that illegible gender is only one site to think through the stakes of how unrecognizability can lead to dehumanization. My reading of this passage is made richer if I recall María Lugones' characterization of what it means to be at ease in a world. Lugones is also trying to describe the consequences of not being recognized by others when she writes, "We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking" (Lugones 8). One way in which the status of not being recognizably human plays out is in how Lugones depicts either being at ease or not being at ease in a world. A person can be at ease by being a fluent speaker in a world; embodying the correct norms, using the expected languages or expressions, or having the correct facility to move through space. However, being completely at ease would also require being normatively happy: agreeing with all of the norms that one embodies, choosing them or feeling as if one would choose them, if one had a choice. One also comes to be at ease by being humanly bonded, and by sharing a history with others, especially daily history as it plays out in the cultural, social and artistic touchstones that one relates to (Lugones 12). Following Lugones' thinking illuminates the everyday ramifications of normativity by detailing how the ability to be recognized as oneself arises in the midst of living life. Thought of in this light, an unlivable life may be one in which human bonds become strained, in which the right expressions do not come easily to the tongue, in which we do not share the same markers of what represents the "common" history or culture. Butler is

attentive here to the double-edged character of norms that govern recognition: an unknowable or unrecognizable life may take place apart from the norms of something like heterosexual marriage, as one pursues kinship configurations or sexual encounters that do not “make sense.” Butler’s ethical concern then would be with the ability of non-normatively gendered subjects to be able to live out their lives well, supported in their variety.

One relevant example that Butler brings up in the “Introduction” to *Undoing Gender* is marriage. This example serves to illustrate the possible ‘remaking of the human’ that can emerge when one takes critical distance from normativity. It shows the importance of posing ethical questions alongside social and political ones; some shallow liberal discourses of rights would advocate marriage as the paradigm of ‘gay rights,’ but not all self-identified queers desire it, or find it a productive site for the remaking of the human. Butler addresses the ways in which marriage gets taken up in disparate LGBTQ communities; for her ends, the question should be, “...how does one oppose the homophobia [so prevalent in contemporary life] without embracing the marriage norm as the exclusive or most highly valued social arrangement for queer sexual lives?” (Butler *Undoing* 5). Many theorists besides Butler have pointed out that centering marriage in the mainstream discussions of gay rights carries along with it a potential conservative framing for the needs of queer-identified people across the spectrum.<sup>13</sup> For her part, Butler is concerned here with recognizing that marriage may not be possible

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<sup>13</sup> It might be a hallmark of a queer, as opposed to LGBT, analysis to insist that greater support for sexual and gender expression will not be found through assimilation into mainstream social structures. For fairly early articulations of this view, see Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

or desirable for many subjects, queer or otherwise, and many people might not find themselves at ease in that way of framing what people might want or need. To that end, she asks “What reorganization of sexual norms would be necessary for those who live sexually and affectively outside the marriage bond or in kin relations to the side of marriage either to be legally and culturally recognized for the endurance and importance of their intimate ties or, equally important, to be free of the need for recognition of this kind?” (Butler *Undoing* 5). Butler is thus attentive to a spectrum of non-normative desires within queer-identified lives: some people might desire a reworking of existing normative structures such that there is greater inclusion for “strange” families and relationships, while some may never feel at ease in that space, but are no less ethically deserving of access to support for the crafting of the lives they do wish to build. This implies that a critical task of her text is to pose further questions as to how the concepts that help structure norms can be reworked, and the kinds of arguments that can be put forth to call for such a restructuring of the limits of acceptable human lives.

This is a project that must not be taken up only in the realm of social policy, but is an important philosophical question, a question that theory should grapple with. Theory can engage critique that confronts ways in which not being at ease within normative structures can inaugurate the space necessary for grappling with how a concept, like the concept of a human, is open to redeployment. To think further about the subjective conditions for such an engagement, I turn now to Butler’s explicit use of ethical theory in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler mentions in the “Introduction” of *Undoing Gender* that agency is constituted in paradox, the paradox of having not chosen the social world that one inhabits. What is interesting about Butler’s

work in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is that she addresses the place of complicity with normatively approved lives alongside the stakes of being excluded from them. Part of the difficulty of ethically engaging with others from either or both of these positions, then, comes from the way that one's sense of self has often become so intertwined with norms that questioning normative lives puts *one's own life* in question. Butler is committed to the assertion that a re-writing is called for by the realization that one's subject position—the ideas that we use to create ourselves, the myths we have drawn on, the language in which it was done, the place it all happened—has been constituted in violence, and we thus have a responsibility to develop a way of representing ourselves that does not reinforce that violence. This transfers some of the risks of unrecognizability onto historically privileged or normatively sanctioned subjects, which illuminates one reason why recognizability cannot be the end of a critical ethical philosophy. Instead, the questions here are of resistant possibilities: how can one accomplish a rewriting of the self such that a historical reality can be ethically confronted? What kinds of steps, insights, processes are necessary? What will people lose, what is at stake? And when such a self-rewriting will require a loss of identity, what force can productively ask that of people? Although the classical ethical question is probably “what should I do?” I think it is important to also take up the question, *how* can I do what I think I should? What would I have to do, how can I manage to change, in order that I can interact with people more ethically?

In order to address such questions, Butler rethinks the subject of ethical deliberation as characterized by what she calls opacity. Opacity depicts a sense of self conceived of not in terms of transparency, but in terms of what one *cannot* know about oneself. Butler is trying to explore the limits of one's ability to provide a narration that

explains one's life because she is interested in reforming the role of accountability in ethical thought. While it is the case for Butler that responsibility and accountability can be useful aspects of an ethical theory, Butler wants to caution against the impulse to expect people to be able to fully account for all of their actions, due to the various limits that are imposed upon a re-thought version of the human person. She writes, "Our narratives come up against an impasse when the conditions of possibility for speaking the truth cannot fully be thematized, where what we speak relies upon a formative history, a sociality, and a corporeality that cannot easily, if at all, be reconstructed in narrative" (Butler *Giving* 132). Alongside my earlier treatment of how apprehension can facilitate critique we should also carefully consider the ways in which individuals will find themselves entwined on a subjective, psychic level with the social world. She reads Adorno and Foucault in her attempt to understand opacity in terms the social dimensions that are not a product of individual will. Butler gets to the heart of what she thinks is at stake when she writes at the end of the book, "If the 'I' cannot effectively be disjoined from the impress of social life, then ethics will surely not only presuppose rhetoric (and the analysis of the mode of address) but social critique as well" (Butler *Giving* 135). On this view, any ethical agent is always embedded in a determinate social scene: location, age, sex, gender, sexuality, class, level of health; these things are unwilling. Thus, it is necessary to theoretically extend a thinking of the self's opacity to include how people are situated in ethical, political and social historical determinations, how that compromises the possibility of acting ethically, how those determinations might be productively resisted, and how a self could be recrafted in a project of critical resistance.

Butler turns to Adorno and Foucault as she sees in their projects the idea that one should consider fallibility an important aspect of human being. She locates this as a condition for being accountable, rather than precluding or diminishing responsibility (Butler *Giving* 111). Further, she sees Adorno and Foucault as recognizing that the “recrafting” of the self is linked to recrafting social conditions, which will call Butler to locate an important place for critique as social transformation in both of their work (Butler *Giving* 135). This last concern leads to Butler’s realization that “Both [Adorno and Foucault] are trying, in different ways, to dislodge the subject as the ground of ethics in order to recast the subject as a problem for ethics,” which must occur through the examination of how norms are produced and how they affect and are affected by subjects (Butler *Giving* 110). Butler understands from them that to even consider the subject as a problem for ethics, she must consider how any norm for ethical behavior decides who will count as a subject or a human, and in what way, which will only make sense within some specific social-political contexts. Ethics, then, as a discourse, cannot assume the subject as ground, but has to take seriously how an ethical project is already at work constituting who counts as a subject. Butler addresses the norms that govern behavior as part of the history of any subject that cannot be accessed completely or whose origin cannot be fully thematized, yet which help constitute the self. Assuming the perspective of such a problematized subject position, she writes “I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and that this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself” (Butler *Giving* 82). That is, Butler tries to develop a way of engaging in ethical deliberation that understands people as caught up in historical realities and social processes that require that each of

us is accountable to others, that one has a kind of obligation to explain oneself. But, some components of the story we need to tell are missing, since the totality of our formative and sustaining contexts will never be recuperable in thought. Nonetheless, Butler argues that there is an ethical demand to consider the self in light of what is outside of anyone's power, and thereby to develop a notion of subjectivity that preserves both fallibility and accountability.

Butler's treatment of Adorno's critique of moral philosophy in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is useful for thinking through the relevance of an opaque and fallible conception of the self for social critique that works toward (something like) livability for a plurality of subjects. Butler understands Adorno to have an acceptance of the "inevitability of injury, along with a moral predicament that emerges as a consequence of being injured" (Butler *Giving* 102). He has this in common with Levinas, who she also addresses in her book; they both reassess the locus of responsibility in terms of an *injured* subject as opposed to an autonomous rational agent. This is taken up by Butler through the use of Adorno's phrase, "becoming human." For Adorno, this means, "If the human is anything, it seems to be a double movement, one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion" (Butler *Giving* 103). Butler sees this movement played out in Adorno's *Problems of Moral Philosophy* as the recognition that we have to maintain moral norms as a kind of self-criticism while we simultaneously live with the realization of the fallibility of our own authority to enact such a criticism (Butler *Giving* 104). That is, requires that one try to "hold fast," in Adorno's words, to experience and what was learned from it, which is important for the development of an ethical consciousness. This requires that one hold fast to a criticism not just of oneself (which might take the form of recognizing that

one has been wrong) but more generally to the ability to hold an authoritative self-criticism at all, since there is an opacity to the self that makes complete self-transparency impossible. On these terms, the power of the agent is decentered, as one can never entirely explain oneself.

The transfer of the site of ethical agency from the autonomous rational subject to a wounded subject is an important transition, one that opens up the possibility of creative ethical thinking toward critical norms. Norms are not universal principles on this view, but rather practices and ideas that are derived from an engagement and critique of one's social world. Butler writes, "...surely we can, and must, devise norms to adjudicate among the forms of impingement [on the "will"], distinguishing between its inevitable and insuperable dimension, on the one hand, and its socially contingent and reversible conditions, on the other" (Butler *Giving* 107). Butler exhibits in her reading of Adorno the necessity for having a *nuanced* understanding of the opacity of one's social location. While it is the case that one could never tell the entire story of how the world or worlds in which one exists came to be, one nonetheless should consider oneself as caught up in a context of producing norms that can critically engage with this world. Butler tries to develop this idea through an engagement with Adorno's notion of "responsibility;" she writes, "...responsibility has to do with assuming an action in the context of a social world where consequences matter" (Butler *Giving* 108). For Butler's reading of Adorno, consequences are the arbiter of the worth of principles. That is, a person is responsible not just for himself but for "the shape of [his] world," and so ethics needs critique in order to consider the consequences of actions not just in terms of immediate effects but in terms of how any actions will be taken up by the existing social world. Butler takes from Adorno a sense that an individual's actions



remain intimately connected with the social network in which sie lives. As Butler states, "...our deliberations will not make sense unless we can come to some understanding of the conditions that make our deliberation possible in the first place (Butler *Giving* 110-11). What Butler urges is not an attempt to offer a complete narrative that will explain the emergence of a decision, but rather to bring into ethical deliberation the conditions that determine what we can talk about, and how we can do it.

### Section three: framing as affective critique

Butler's engagement with ethical critiques connects a rethinking of the self which is critical of sovereign models of the subject to the conceptualization of norms that drives her earlier work. This allows her to successfully argue that critique is an essential component of ethical thought, which paves the way to make an ethical force part of the analytic of social ontology she develops in *Frames of War*. In this text, the concern in *Giving an Account of Oneself* with how ethics and social critique imply each other is combined with a more explicit account of how affect is mobilized in social political discourse, as Butler develops concepts and language that can address and contest the violence of war by engaging the relationship between affect and the epistemological assumptions of contemporary political claims. As I mentioned above, much of *Frames of War* is concerned with taking up the question of how to "understand the visual dimension of war as it relates to the question of whose lives are grievable and whose are not" (Butler *Frames* 74). That is, Butler continues to be concerned with a differential access to appearing as human, here played out through an engagement with how war is

presented through the discourse and images of popular media. In the chapter of *Frames of War* “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag,” Butler reads Susan Sontag’s texts *Regarding the Pain of Others* and *On Photography* to help think through the way that U.S. war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan are presented through media, in particular after the scandals of the Abu Ghraib photographs (Butler *Frames* 64-65). Sontag critiques the state of photojournalism in these books, lamenting that photographs “have the capacity momentarily to move us, [but] they do not allow the building up of an interpretation,” interpretation being the provenance of narrative (Butler *Frames* 67). While Butler finds Sontag “good company” when thinking about these pictures of torture and how they work, she takes her distance from Sontag’s analysis around the idea of whether or not these photos express or convey an interpretation (Butler *Frames* 78). For Butler, rather, “the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation—and one that may unsettle both maker and viewer in its turn” (Butler *Frames* 67). On this analysis, a critical engagement with photographs may serve in the building of a resistant interpretation of current events. Reflecting on the stakes of photojournalism that depicts the U.S war in Iraq, she further notes,

...our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames. There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness, that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives. And then there are frames that foreclose responsiveness, where this activity of foreclosure is effectively and repeatedly performed by the frame itself—its own negative action, as it were, toward

what will not be explicitly represented. For alternative frames to exist and permit another kind of content would perhaps communicate a suffering that might lead to an alteration of our political assessment of the current wars. For photographs to communicate in this way, they must have a transitive function, making us susceptible to ethical responsiveness. (Butler *Frames* 77)

I described the social-ontological category of apprehension above as an operation of thought which has the possibility to work as a kind of lever that alters affective, ethical relations. Here Butler calls for a re-crafting of the frames that customarily present people's lives to each other as a strategy for bringing about the apprehension of a break in those frames. In this reading of Butler, I want to call attention to the role of affect in the "susceptibility" she calls for above, and to how "outrage" and "opposition" are companions to critique. There are reasoned arguments to be made against dehumanizing the populations one's country is at war with; but to apprehend a life when presented with dehumanized representations of foreign populations may require something beyond a sound argument. This is not to suggest that reason should be marked by the absence of emotion, but rather to acknowledge that what counts as "reason" is continually being contested, and so cannot be appealed to as an intractable force that guides ethical responsiveness. Coming to be "susceptible to ethical responsiveness," perhaps because a photograph in the newspaper conveys the suffering of another, experiencing an opening up of one's capacity to have one's views on political situations transformed—this calls not only for argumentation, but also for an altered affective relationship to the conditions of one's social world. On this analysis, for images like these photos to have ethical traction they must be "transitive," "relay affect" and "act upon viewers in ways that have a direct bearing on the kinds of judgments

those viewers will formulate about the world” (Butler *Frames* 68). Butler’s position is that “[e]ven the most transparent of documentary images is framed, and framed for a purpose, carrying that purpose within its frame and implementing it through the frame;” a photograph “interprets the reality it registers” (Butler *Frames* 70). So for Butler, in considering the ways embedded journalists and photographers are limited in their access and directed in the pictures they can publish, it’s clear that there is “...a political background ... being explicitly formulated and renewed through and by the frame” (Butler *Frames* 71). State power is thus actively at work in contemporary war photography, helping to shape political consciousness by organizing perceptions and interpretations of the “reality” interpreted through, not displayed in, the photo. The state seeks to manipulate the “field of perception and, more generally, the field of representability, in order to control affect—in anticipation of the way affect is not only structured by interpretation, but structures interpretation as well” (Butler *Frames* 72). These pictures both reflect and institute an epistemological perspective on human suffering that functions according to a differential conferral of true human worth, while in at least some cases state power is able to mobilize war photography for the minimization of opposition or dissent to the techniques of war (Butler *Frames* 73).

The crafting and manipulation of affect is thus essential to the work of frames, both in maintaining the alleged stability and truth of what appears, and in the possibility for crafting different, resistant frames. As Butler writes,

War sustains its practices though acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others. ...To encounter the precariousness of

another life, the senses have to be operative, which means that a struggle must be waged against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways. The point is not to celebrate a full deregulation of affect, but to query the conditions of responsiveness by offering interpretive matrices for the understanding of war that question and oppose the dominant interpretations—interpretations that not only act upon affect, but take form and become effective as affect itself. (Butler *Frames* 52)

Thus, one way in which support for wars is managed is by setting the affective conditions for some lives to appear as disposable. There is no easy distinction here between affect and interpretation: political sensibilities and the ability to engage with politics, ethics, and/or social critique is dissociable from affective experiences, and affective meaning is part of the operations of resistant critique. While Butler is careful here not to suggest that reason or thought needs to give way for the “truth” of affect—she is not arguing that thinking be replaced with feeling—she stresses that any attempt to critique the violence of war entails, in part, feeling differently about the political landscape that engenders violence, and about the victims and survivors of that violence. This requires scrutinizing how the frames used in popular discourses to represent the circumstances and consequences of war are subtended, and being attentive to when they break down. Critique can be inaugurated by and in turn inaugurate feeling differently about one’s situation viv-a-vis normativity or state power. As Butler puts it, when frames break, there can be “a certain release, a loosening of the mechanism of control, and with it, a new trajectory of affect” (Butler *Frames* 11). Such a “new trajectory” is crucial for the intentional crafting of the conditions for ethical responsiveness: as I have already noted, the conditions of responsiveness are themselves questions of social critique under this analysis. Because the condition of ‘generalized precariousness’ for

Butler means that all beings are vulnerable to forces that are not reducible to their own or anyone else's agency, control, or responsibility, an ethical frame other than those of traditional accountability and responsibility is necessary in order to try to theorize the conditions under which moral responsiveness, for example to the suffering of another, can even take place. This responsiveness must be conceived as an *affective* event. As Butler argues, "Such affects, I would argue, become not just the basis, but the very stuff of ideation and critique" (Butler *Frames* 34). Calling affect the *stuff* of critique seems insightful—affect does not simply attend the judgments made about social political life, but experiencing affects is itself already *judgmental*.

Critiques of war must work with, not over or below, such affective states. These ideational, critical affects are formed in conjunction with the worlds one inhabits, generated in the process of living human lives. Moreover, such judgmental affects are not simply anyone's unique feelings: Butler argues throughout *Frames* that affect is a social experience, stating that "...affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere," that it "depends upon social supports for feeling" and that "we can only feel and claim affect as our own on the condition that we have already been inscribed in a circuit of social affect" (Butler *Frames* 50).<sup>14</sup> If the violence of war is framed, then any critique that seeks to resist violence must maintain a critical relationship with a structural analysis of power, in the midst of affectively interpreting the meaning of how suffering and violence are framed. Unpacking the operations of framing helps expose the emotion that is already buried in social, political, ethical judgments and the inevitable consequences of these judgments. Butler indicates that different frames for

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<sup>14</sup> I return to a conception of a circuit of affect in my treatment of Sara Ahmed's work in my conclusion.

conceiving of the suffering of others are called for if one wants to resist violence; frames that could help produce affect-interpretations that resist violence would pay as much attention to the larger operations of power as possible. In light of this, Butler suggests that we integrate an idea of non-violence into political analysis, non-violence conceived of not as a principle but rather as a *claim*, stating, “If there is a claim of non-violence or if non-violence makes a claim upon us...[n]on-violence then arrives as an address or an appeal” (Butler *Frames* 165). Butler rejects invoking a principle as principles belong to an orientation toward ethics that requires a self-sovereign agent who can choose to meet them unequivocally, a model of agency I argued against in the section above. An appeal, on these terms, neither assumes that people already know what is right, and just have to *do it*, or that the material conditions are already on the ground for moral actions to be supported and sustained, but rather poses the *possibility* of moral response as an ongoing question. She argues that non-violence describes “the mired and conflicted position of a subject who is injured, rageful, disposed to violent retribution and nevertheless struggles against that action (often crafting the rage against itself). The struggle against violence accepts violence as its own possibility” (Butler *Frames* 171). Non-violence is here the position of a subject who struggles with ambivalence, one that recognizes that the anger as a response to violence and seeking to resist it is not an external problem—not just because there is a social-ontological connection between lives, but because the forces that structure and support the differential harm of violence are a significant part of the psyches and subjectivities that are so horrified by it (Butler *Frames* 163).<sup>15</sup> The claim of non-violence is salient for theory as well as for individuals:

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<sup>15</sup> This analysis bears strong parallels with the more radical feminist work on intimate partner violence, which explicitly links incidences of what is usually referred to as domestic violence, violence directed at one’s partners and children, often by men, with

violence is theory's own possibility. Attention to violence has to be subtle and canny and resist the lure of positing the theoretical perspective as the neutral one.<sup>16</sup> Engaging Butler's analysis of the logic of a possible *claim* of non-violence will serve as one example of how a philosophical apparatus can deal critically with affect, both in terms of how suffering objects are presented and how affect is considered and managed within the narrative presentation of a theory.

Addressing this in the *Frames* chapter "The Claim of Non-violence," Butler engages a critique of an earlier articulation of this argument that was published in *differences*.<sup>17</sup> There, Catherine Mills challenged Butler to clarify how non-violence can be a legitimate position for subjects to inhabit since, according to Butler's own analysis of normativity and subject-formation, violence is constitutive for subjectivity. Butler acknowledges that "...when one is formed in violence...and that formative action continues throughout one's life, an ethical quandary arises about how to live the violence of one's formative history, how to effect shifts and reversals in its iteration" (Butler *Frames* 170). Yet she argues, following the line of her argument in *Giving an Account of Oneself* which I discussed above, that the structural violence of ethical, social,

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its social supports. This kind of analysis avoids conceiving of such violence as simply a problem of an individual's aggression, and so seeks its eradication not within isolated problem individuals, but in the context of a violent world that we are all a part of, and which we all would have to resist. For more on this, see Priya Kandaswamy, "Innocent Victims and Brave New Laws: State Protection and the Battered Women's Movement," *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* ed. aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore Mattilda (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006). Ann Russo and Melissa Spatz, *Communities Engaged in Resisting Violence* (Chicago: Women and Girls CAN, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> The distinction between traditional and critical theory is operative here; see Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing 1975).

<sup>17</sup> See the original conversation here: Fiona Jenkins, "Toward a Nonviolent Ethics: Response to Catherine Mills," *differences* 18.2 (2007). Catherine Mills, "Normative Violence, Vulnerability, and Responsibility," *differences* 18.2 (2007). Judith Butler, "Reply from Judith Butler to Mills and Jenkins," *Differences* 18.2 (2007).



political life is both the problem to be addressed and the condition of the possibly for taking up such a task. Without that constitutive violence of subjectivity,

There would be no struggle, no obligation, and no difficulty. The point is not to eradicate the conditions of one's own production, but only to assume responsibility for living a life that contests the determining power of that production; in other words, that makes good use of the iterability of the productive norms and, hence, of their fragility and transformability. ...Being mired in violence means that even as the struggle is thick, difficult, impending, fitful, and necessary, it is not the same as a determinism—being mired is the condition of possibility for the struggle for non-violence, and that is also why the struggle so often fails. If this were not the case, there would be no struggle at all, but only repression and the quest for a false transcendence. (Butler *Frames* 170-71).

It is precisely because the structure of normativity is unstable, continually comprised of repeated actions, that norms are open to resistance and reformulation. On this analysis, non-violence should not be conceived of as purity of soul, by 'virtue or principle'—as she states, this just 'disavows are represses' violence (Butler *Frames* 171-72). In an argument that is difficult, but not contradictory, Butler suggests that "responsibility," a term with much ethical and political baggage, can assume a different shape. This term can mark the relationship of responsiveness that arises even at the moment when the conditions for breaking with a frame seem impossible, can be characterized in terms of struggle, which is its own possibility.

At the same times, *how* one negotiates one's own constitutive violence remains an open ethical question, which calls Butler to consider different ways of being what she

names “injured and rageful” subjects, critiquing the move to morally legitimate one’s own violence, which “transmut[es] aggression into virtue” (Butler *Frames* 172). There is much to think through here: for one thing, Butler critiques the violence that stems from privilege and oppression alike, although she does add a caveat to state that she is not condoning freedom struggles writ large, since Butler’s analysis remains open to particular social-political concerns. This perhaps gesture, it could be suggested, reveals her theory to be insufficiently complete. However, I would suggest instead that it does not reveal a weakness in her method, but rather, is consistent with a notion of normativity as changeable and dynamic, as is the ethical responsiveness that must inhabit a philosophical apparatus for considering violence. What she has argued is that normativity is breakable; how those breaks get negotiated in terms of ethical response has not been detailed, and cannot rightly be elaborated, given Butler’s own tenets that norms, morals, and thought be constantly considered incomplete and open to critique.<sup>18</sup> However, she has not backed herself into a quietist corner— Butler moves from the analysis of structure to a newly posed question of responsibility: a certain shift in terrain that is necessary to the crafting of a wider frame for considering questions of violence. She suggests engaging conceptualizations of moral responsiveness and responsibility that have at least one crucial characteristic: engaging the negative affects of violence, and aggression from the perspective of complicity and ambivalence. Violence is too-easily legitimated if presumed to serve a greater good. To resist violence, one has to implicate oneself in the question of violence; this kind of “non-moralized” sense of

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<sup>18</sup> It would perhaps be interesting to consider Butler’s various political stands over against Adorno’s. Adorno notoriously disappointed supporters of radical politics, while Butler spoke at Occupy Wall Street. Moreover, Spivak can be quiet about her activism, but seems committed to putting into action what she supports theoretically in principle, particularly with regard to education, while Adorno was a political cynic.

responsibility for one's aggression resists the shirking of responsibility for violence and also its correlate position that legitimates violence through a position of virtue or moral purity. As she puts it, "...non-violence, when and where it exists, involves an aggressive vigilance over aggression's tendency to emerge as violence. As such, non-violence is a struggle..." (Butler *Frames* 170). Aggression, then, and anger, are not incompatible with non-violence conceived as a claim. And, I'd suggest, the importance of this is that it doesn't require a purification of emotions to think non-violence as a resistance to the techniques of war, but rather allows for a kind of framework that maintains the complexity of structural oppressions, as well as a recognition that the 'problem of violence' isn't going to be solved 'out there.' Addressing violence must affect one's most intimate experiences. She states, "If non-violence has the opportunity to emerge here, it would take its departure not from a recognition of the injurability of all peoples (however true that might be), but from an understanding of the possibilities of one's own violent actions in relation to those lives to which one is bound, including those whom one never chose and never knew..." (Butler *Frames* 179). If social-ontological claims that lives are precarious and that injurability is a condition of life have very little if any determinate ethical force on their own, philosophical attention must, then, be paid to the *ways in which* violence is taken up and attended to, and on this analysis, the most productive position from which to contribute to the critique of violence is one of complicity with it. And as she notes, "...non-violence is not a peaceful state, but a social and political struggle to make rage articulate and effective—the carefully crafted 'fuck you'" (Butler *Frames* 182).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that Judith Butler's analysis of the role of normative framing in the production of livable and grievable lives contributes productively to ethical, social, political critique that seeks to disentangle social intelligibility and social legitimacy and work towards less-violent and less-coercive treatments of human diversity. I argued that Butler's account of normativity engages not-quite rational aspects of human experiences and makes social-political blindspots around the production of gender and foreign enemies available for critique. Situating Butler's project in terms of intersectional feminist and queer analyses, I showed that for Butler the performance of norms of social identity are active and unstable. Norms render some lives more socially intelligible and some less through the performative operations of power. However, normative demands can be a place for the recapturing of agency, as critique that resists the violence of dehumanization can be inaugurated when the categories that control access to normative humanity are exposed as open, permeable, and active, susceptible to reinterpretation and redeployment. Butler introduces the term *apprehension* to mark a kind of awareness or consciousness that can contest normative expectations by marking its failures in an analysis of gender as well as in an account of precarious lives under conditions of war.

I followed this epistemic analysis with an express engagement with ethics, arguing that an unrecognizable life for Butler can, in certain circumstances, become an unlivable life. At issue is how to negotiate normativity while retaining a capacity to evaluate some norms as better, and some worse. I show that Butler connects the normative analysis of frames to an ethical critique by showing how *livable life* is a critical concept that carries an ethical force. My account of apprehension is thus expanded here

into a consideration of the ways individuals find themselves entwined with the social world, and I suggest that an apprehension of diversity must give way to cultivating different kinds of support for differently lived lives. I draw on Butler's insistence on the opacity and fallibility of human subjects to complicate the sense of the ethical at issue by articulating the restricted sense agency that results when one is not completely transparent to himself. A social being is thus shown to be immersed in social conditions such that the possibility of ethical responsiveness, for instance to the representation of another's suffering, cannot be assumed. Butler's work thus shows that there is an ethical call to maintain an engagement with the complexity of lived, corporeal complicity with violence. Thus, the *conditions* for ethical responsiveness must be opened up to affect-attentive critique. There is an urgent need to reveal the way that human lives are framed during times of war, to expand the apprehension of precariousness in order to make it more difficult to accept violence done to others.

My final argument set out how critiquing the conditions of ethical responsiveness requires an analysis of the role of affect in the work of framing. Butler develops this argument through an analysis of war photography, suggesting that a critical engagement with the way that photographs convey affect is part of building of a resistant interpretation of current events. I described the social-ontological category of apprehension as a kind of thinking that displaces affective, ethical relations. Here Butler calls for a re-crafting of the frames that customarily present people's lives to each other so that the conditions widen to include a greater susceptibility to responsiveness. The crafting and manipulation of affect is essential to the successful work of frames, both in maintaining the alleged stability and truth of what appears, and in the possibility for crafting different, resistant frames. Affect, she suggests, does not only attend the

judgments made about social political life, but experiencing affects is itself already *judgmental*. Unpacking the operations of framing exposes the emotion that is already buried in social, political, ethical judgments as part of the violent operations of social power. In light of this, Butler suggests that we integrate an affective notion non-violence into political analysis, understood as a claim or a call. Attending to a call of non-violence cultivates an orientation toward ethical responsiveness while negotiating one's complicity with the normative structures of one's social life. Butler's affectively attentive non-violence is not a passive position, but one that cultivates resistant affects as a productive stance from which to rethink social critique of suffering under conditions of modern war.

My argument is that an understanding of how affect props up claims about who is and who is not intelligible and/or legitimate calls for critique of the conditions to better apprehend others as having socially, politically, and ethically significant lives. Taking account of the logic at work in normative expectations can help in developing an affect-attentive critical philosophy. From this perspective I can begin to articulate how people become attached to the categories that represent social life and begin to track the emotional costs for those of us who do not find ourselves dwelling very easily within dominant norms. I have suggested that an attempt to critique the violence of war entails, in part, feeling differently about the social-political landscape that engenders violence, and about who comes to be its targets. In the following chapter, I continue this argument by drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno in order to think more explicitly about the impact of a conceptual symmetry between exploitative economic and political systems, social value systems, and their intellectual justifications. Critical theorists such as Adorno responded to the genocidal actions of WWII Germany by

diagnosing a structural similarity between systematic philosophical projects such as those of Kant and Hegel and dehumanizing Capitalistic means of production. Adorno's critique of Idealism, for instance, contends that a philosophical apparatus must be responsive to its own possible implication in the perpetuation of violence and suffering and recognizes that its affective appeals are part of the operations of its logics. In what follows, I argue that Adorno's thought expands my account of affect-attentive critical philosophy. His method maintains the tension between reason and unreason in order to intentionally attending to affective states, and thereby critiques the exploitation or oppression of social subjects through systematic violence.

## Chapter Two: the force of pain in Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics

### Introduction

There is a lively debate surrounding the question of to what extent the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno can be rendered positive, translated either into a political program, a set of social norms, an ethical theory, or a specific moral directive.<sup>1</sup> My interest here is to treat Adorno's thinking in a manner sympathetic to the tenor of his work, by placing conceptual thought into the service of critique that is simultaneously ethical, political and social. However, to assign any kind of positive element to his thinking is difficult. Indeed, Adorno is canny almost to a fault with regard to the possibility of deriving prescription from his work. This is all the more odd as it *seems* that Adorno's work would tend toward a specific end: to enable the reader to break out of the programmatic rationality of an identitarian world, one over-determined by societal forces which mobilize thinking to the advantage of certain power interests and to the disadvantage of the majority. Adorno's philosophy seeks to critique and refigure the "hellish circle" of 20th Century culture in which subjectivity lapses into bourgeois coldness and human beings can be reduced to torturable bodies (Adorno *Metaphysics*

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Adorno and the ethical has been an oft-discussed question over the last decade. Fabian Freyenhagen summarizes these debates well, indicating that some interlocutors claim Adorno's philosophy can only be critical, never normative (e.g. Giuseppe Tassone), while others are seeking various ways to maintain that Adorno's thinking supports an ethics, or is itself inherently ethical (e.g. J.M Bernstein). Fabian Freyenhagen, "Moral Philosophy," *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008). 107-08 See also the two journals that dedicated issues to the topic: *Adorno and Ethics*. Spec. issue of *New German Critique* 97 (2006) and *Adorno: Critique, Ethics, Knowledge*. Spec. issue of *Constellations*. 12. 1 (2005)



126). Yet, this is a difficult claim to ground or substantiate. Much of the challenge and the thrill of reading Adorno comes from his insistence on negativity, his deployment of aphoristic models, and his use of affective language. That is, the presentation of his thought follows a negative dialectic understood, as he puts it in the “Preface” to *Negative Dialectics*, as a “consistent sense of nonidentity,” and so depicts the movement of a constant oscillation between the extremities of any given opposition. He makes use of “models” which are not specific examples of general ideas but rather unique constellations of thought that follow their own paths and tend toward their own particular ends. All of this is invested with an emotional, rhetorical use of language that seems to compel the reader toward deep emotional commitments, while at the same time Adorno is so dedicated to negativity that he articulates an express discomfort with the presentation of what those investments should entail.

Adorno’s philosophical, historical and cultural references are sweeping. For example, *Negative Dialectics* has various protagonists and antagonists. He takes up and critiques many philosophers and schools of philosophy. It is clear that Adorno understands his project to be speaking to the exigent needs of his time. Yet there is no single anchor for the work. This leads to a text that is rhetorically arranged so as to make any clear-cut claims nearly impossible, full as it is of extended meditations cautioning against positivity, against praxis, and against meaning as such.<sup>2</sup> Yet his

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<sup>2</sup> Adorno’s concern is that favoring positivity can necessitate violently subsuming the particular to the universal. One sees this, for instance, in the philosophy of Hegel; see “Critique of Positive Negation” (Adorno *Dialectics* 158-161). His concern with action, especially regarding political activism, is that a hasty attitude toward theory will often counteract its own ends, as it is theory for Adorno that can conceptualize how to intervene into material structures or social orders; see “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (Adorno *Models* 263). Adorno’s concern with meaning is that given degraded social conditions, to posit meaning from a metaphysical standpoint can be a grotesque

reticence to “achieve something positive by means of negation,” as he puts it in the “Preface” to *Negative Dialectics*, is not meant to evacuate the import of his philosophical contributions. Rather, he aims to “free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy” (Adorno *Dialectics* xix). So the reader is led to feel that there is a force to Adorno’s work, and left wondering what such a force might be if it does not lead to “positivity.” One might ask, if Adorno’s project must be inscribed outside of the history of philosophy,<sup>3</sup> why is it that much of that same work is philosophical in the strictest sense, concerned with providing readings of the canonical figures of Western philosophical thought and reliant upon that tradition terminologically and methodologically? For instance, a central concern of his philosophy is that the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity is found in their mutual constitution. In this he is influenced by Kant and Hegel, thinkers he takes great pains to delineate as direct influences on his work. It is in distinguishing his own use of concepts from theirs that he carves out a place for himself with regard to the tradition of German Idealism, crafting the possibility of developing a negative, dialectical methodology. This critical method of determinacy without affirmation works by retaining traditional philosophical categories “as qualitatively altered” (Adorno *Dialectics* xx). As an anti-system, a negative dialectics is nonetheless a kind of systems-thinking, one that uses the force of abstract thought or theoretical engagement against itself, so as to unsettle any philosophical claims to totality or unqualified universality, and to think in favor of that which resists abstraction. As Adorno states, “[t]he name of dialectics says no more, to

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way of accounting for or justifying senseless suffering; see the lecture series *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (Adorno *Metaphysics* 105).

<sup>3</sup> As is implied by the first line of the “Preface” “*Negative Dialectics* is a phrase that flouts tradition” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2004) xix.

begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” (Adorno *Dialectics* 5). This is how a negative dialectical method remains attentive to the irreducibility of object and concept to each other, as “the consistent sense of nonidentity” (Adorno *Dialectics* 5). Yet, through the skillful employment of rhetorical devices that appeal to highly affective ideas such as “bourgeois,” “labor,” and “fascism,” Adorno uses evocative language to situate his philosophical work in a particular, historical time, namely the global rise of capitalism and its exploitative means of production in a post World-War era that is living the guilt of its harmful political decisions. As J.M. Bernstein puts it in his *Disenchantment and Ethics*, “[r]eaders of Adorno are inevitably struck by how everything he wrote was infused with a stringent and commanding ethical intensity” (Bernstein xi). Thus, his work produces what can be imprecisely called a *feeling* of its ethical, social and political import, as if the reader finds himself caught up in and implicated by Adorno’s critiques. Adorno’s work may be highly political, even inflammatory, but is never simply political philosophy—just as it can be affectively arresting, devastating in its portrayal of horror, but still resist reifying moral maxims.

In engaging with Adorno, I delimit some of the peculiarities of abstract, universal thought, and ask how such thought can be refigured in a negative dialectics. A post-Enlightenment philosophy such as Adorno’s struggles with the relationship between particular historical situations and their universal dimensions, all the while burdened with the knowledge of the dangers and promises of universality. That is, universal thinking is clear, in as much as the distilling power of abstraction simplifies in order to render more general. Adorno tried to work through the universal dimensions of particular situations in order to marshal the clarity of universal thinking for

unraveling the complexities of experiences. His methodology is thus useful for grappling with the relationship between particulars and generals through a compromised sense of universality. In what follows, I draw on a selection of Adorno's constellations to display how his negative method can contribute to an affect-attentive critical philosophy that is simultaneously ethical, social and political. I lay out my reading in three interdependent sections. In each, I take up affect, critique and the interrelation of ethical, societal, and political analysis in a constellation with a distinct emphasis. In the first section below, "Immediacy and Conceptual Thinking," I show how Adorno's thought treats the non-conceptual by thinking through the affinities and disparities of objectivity and subjectivity from the perspective of a negative dialectics. My goal is to understand how suffering, as an objective-subjective moment, is a possible site for human experience to impose upon theoretical, philosophical. This sets up the method by which Adorno is able to argue that theoretical cognition can attempt to be accountable to the concrete experiences of living human individuals, without arguing that everything pertinent to human experience must be rational in the strictest sense of the term. For Adorno, the subject is always mediated by objectivity, both vis-à-vis the world and in terms of the dialectics of subject and object internal to the subject.

In the second section, "A critical ethics: Woe speaks, go?," I explore how Adorno's treatment of the physical aspects of human experience, especially human suffering, opens up into his treatment of moral philosophy, arguing that Adorno's account of the corporeal is relevant for ethical analysis. Adorno's lecture course, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, poses the question of whether "the good life" is possible under "bad conditions," and I show here how Adorno's engagement with moral theory is productively entwined with an analysis of social conditions. I argue that his cynicism

toward the possibility of the good life and problematization of the possibility of a moral good do not undermine the possibilities of his negative methodology serving ethical critique. Rather, by drawing on my prior analysis of Adorno's treatment of immediacy in conjunction with Adorno's use of the dialectic of theory and praxis, I show that Adorno's account of the role of conviction in moral resistance is one way in which a philosophical account can engage, without over-determining, non-rational aspects of human life. I thus claim in my reading that the ethical force of Adorno's thought is found not in presenting a foundation for normative claims, but in providing a method for engaging in critique.

In the third section, "The Problem of Auschwitz: Affect and Critique," I conclude by showing the importance of affect for Adorno's critical philosophy by treating his invocations of Auschwitz. Although Adorno claims both in *Negative Dialectics* and *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* that Hitler has imposed "a new categorical imperative upon mankind," I remain skeptical about the theoretical ramifications of an invocation of the historical *singularity* of the Jewish Holocaust. However, I do contend that Adorno's use of the *sign* of Auschwitz is important for understanding how resistant moral thinking can use affective rhetoric to open up and sustain a critique of metaphysics. In order to make use of the insights Adorno offers without collapsing into a depoliticized, and so quietist, analysis, the rhetorical and affective force of Adorno's argument must be regarded as a key component of the theoretical force of his use of *Auschwitz* as a sign. Adorno's thinking remains useful for critical philosophy in as much as his quasi-systematic approach relentlessly exposes the contradictions at play in universal values, and his conception of guilt marks an objective, rather than psychological, interrelation of a subject with his social world. On my

reading, thinking Adorno's philosophy together with Judith Butler's and Gayatri Spivak's offers a way to read his analysis of guilt, which could otherwise be read as totalizing and paralyzing, in terms of an inextricable complicity with one's social world as a formative condition. I thus suggest that his analysis is made even more useful for thinking the relation between social legitimacy and social intelligibility when thought together with methods that explicitly treat social identity. Adorno thus contributes to an affect-attentive critical philosophy by offering a critique of violence that philosophically engages moral concepts while maintaining the tension between reason and unreason through a deliberate invocation of affective states.

#### Section one: immediacy and conceptual thinking

I begin my engagement with Adorno by turning to his *Negative Dialectics* and offer a reading of what I believe are a few of the most pivotal sections from Part II of *Negative Dialectics* for thinking about how philosophy can attend to physical and somatic experiences. I suggest in my reading that to follow the ways Adorno engages from the perspective of cognition what is other than it one should start with how Adorno engages *objectivity*. In the section of *Negative Dialectics* called "Indirectness by Objectivity [*Vermittlung durch Objektivität*],"<sup>4</sup> Adorno lays out what is for him the status of objectivity with regard to philosophical thought, particularly in the tradition of German Idealism. Objectivity is on this mode of thinking qualified as "heteronomous

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<sup>4</sup> E.B Ashton sometimes translates *Vermittlung* as "mediation," and sometimes, significantly in this section of *Negative Dialectics*, as "transmission." Here Ashton translates *Unmittelbarkeit*, "immediacy," also as "directness." These translations seem adequate, but they deviate from common philosophical terminology; being aware of the original German allows the influence of the tradition Kant and Hegel to be recognized. I will tend to use "mediation" and "immediacy" in my own writing.

to the subject,” “behind that which the subject can experience,” “denied to the primary realm of subjective experience” (Adorno *Dialectics* 170). Thus, a negative dialectical method, as a theoretical discourse, has to devise a way of engaging something quite different from itself. Here, I take up the way that negative dialectics produces a way of accessing, not this heteronomy itself, but the potential for better experiencing the harmful effects of its occlusion, by thinking through the ways Adorno invokes suffering in *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>5</sup> To expose suffering with negative dialectics is to expand the possibilities for thinking about the pain of human beings in such a way as to reveal possibilities for its relief. I will thus show in my analysis that through the engagement with objectivity, or corporeality, Adorno is able craft a space for a not entirely rational aspect of human experience to be brought to bear on ethical, social, political thought.

Thinking through how the concept *suffering* works in Adorno’s thought requires first attending to his use of the concept *immediacy*. For Adorno, *immediacy* carries within it the idea that in order to have meaning knowledge must point outside itself. Adorno writes, “Immediacy is no modality, no mere definition of the ‘how’ for a consciousness. It is objective: its concept, the concept of immediacy, points to that which cannot be removed by its own concept. Mediation makes no claim whatever to

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<sup>5</sup> As I indicate above in my Introduction, it seems to me that suffering remains a useful philosophical category for projects that seek to craft theory that supports social transformation or the redress of historical, social and political injustices. To my mind, such an engagement must continue to invoke the category of suffering but only in a critical capacity, one that actively resists the reduction of the sufferer to their body or the reduction of the person to the status of a disempowered victim. On other possible deployments of Adorno’s category of suffering for feminist analyses, see Jennifer L. Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry: What Adorno Can Contribute to a Feminist Ethics” *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno* ed. Renée Heberle, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). And Renée Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics: Feminism and the Politics of Suffering,” *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, ed. Renée Heberle, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

exhaust all things; it postulates, rather, that what it transmits is not thereby exhausted” (Adorno *Dialectics* 171-72). The mediation of something objective *must* postulate, must produce as knowledge, the admission that it is not entirely what it represents. But what is immediate itself does not need to be fully understood; for Adorno, we cannot know our objects entirely, but we can know *that* they are, and we can take up this discontinuity in thought. As Adorno has indicated, in order to think, we need something to think about, while what we think about does not need thought in the same way. He develops this further in his critique of transcendental subjectivity, in which he draws on a distinction between what is “real” or concrete and what one can *know* about such an “immediacy,” in order to exhibit that a transcendental subject is reified, while the human individual is concrete. For instance, he writes, “The unity of consciousness is that of the individual human consciousness. Even as a principle it visibly bears its traces, and thus the traces of entity. For transcendental philosophy, the ubiquity of individual self-consciousness will indeed turn it into a universal that may no longer boast of the advantages of concrete self-certainty...” (Adorno *Dialectics* 171-72). While it may seem at first that the appeal to immediacy is fundamentally uncritical, because immediacy can only be engaged through a dialectic of immediacy and subjectivity there is no appeal to an unequivocal experience as ground for any of Adorno’s claims.<sup>6</sup> The potential of concrete self-certainty, knowing oneself as actual in the world, having access to one’s experiences as one’s own, are on Adorno’s view usurped by a philosophical attempt to claim more power for the universal than the concrete particular. Adorno points out that this has not, and possibly cannot, be fully

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<sup>6</sup> See Adorno’s “On Subject and Object” for a fuller account of the mutual constitution, yet discontinuity, of subject and object, especially Section 2. Theodor W. Adorno, Critical Models Interventions and Catchwords, trans. Henry W. Pickford, European Perspectives, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).



accomplished; in order for there to be a unity of consciousness there must also be an individual consciousness that will bear traces of its concrete materiality, here called “entity.” Nonetheless, the continued advent of the transcendental or universal subject, coupled with the systematic economic dependence on the exchange principle, perpetuates not the freedom of individual human subjects, but rather the hardening and increased impenetrability of people. This is in short Adorno’s critique of Idealism’s treatment of the subject: universal subjectivity attempts to render people more static and hence more like objects in the classical sense, thereby to articulate a seemingly more inflexible account of the human person. Such a subject position, if adopted, finds its strength in consistency and identification with abiding or eternal values in a way that makes critique of such values difficult.

In order to think philosophically about an experience that would surpass the limitations of such a reified consciousness and thus inaugurate a different kind of critique, one must be able to recognize an objectivity in human experience. In this sense, for Adorno the subject *is* objective, but not entirely, because subjectivity deals with concepts and so deals in abstraction. But again, subjective mediation never exhausts an “entity.” And since the “I” is an entity, thinking also does not exhaust the subject that thinks. What this indicates is that people occupy a place between pure subjectivity and pure objectivity, the significance of which will become clearer through a closer look at how Adorno employs the concept “suffering” in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno augments the vocabulary he had been developing to describe objectivity by introducing the terms “physical”<sup>7</sup> and “somatic.”<sup>8</sup> The relationship between

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<sup>7</sup> “Physical” translates both *leiblich* and *körperlich*.

<sup>8</sup> *somatisch*

subjectivity and objectivity is thus expanded to specifically address the possibility of cognizing not just any object, but the human being as object. Adorno argues that the mind has a *somatic*, rather than simply *immediate* or *objective* moment within it, while he concedes that once any object becomes an object for cognition, what he calls here its “physical side” is spiritualized, or made abstract (Adorno *Dialectics* 179). However, because of the discontinuity between subject and object, subjective analysis can still recognize that something escapes its purview. As Adorno says here, “The somatic moment as the not purely cognitive part of cognition is irreducible.... Physicality emerges as the ontical pole of subjective cognition, as the core of that cognition” (*Dialectics* 193-94). It is significant that Adorno institutes a shift in his language: the dialectic that Adorno previously drew between subject and object is invoked here in this dialectic of mind and body, within the subject.

One place to consider this relationship specific to the human individual is by thinking about suffering, as Adorno delineates what he views is the correct relationship between the suffering of an individual and the production of knowledge, and then the responsibility of society as well as theory to such suffering. Thus “suffering” is a crucial category for dialectical thinking about human affairs. It represents a moment in the subject that is mediated, as any cognition of it is necessarily abstract, yet cannot be eradicated through intellectual mechanisms. Thus, it can be called an instance of the objectivity of a subject, as well as the objectivity that a subject experiences in himself. Adorno begins by stating,

The supposed basic facts of consciousness are something other than mere facts of consciousness. In the dimension of pleasure and displeasure they are invaded by a physical moment. All pain and all negativity, the moving forces of

dialectical thinking, assume the variously conveyed, sometimes unrecognizable form of physical things, just as all happiness aims at sensual fulfillment and obtains objectivity in that fulfillment. (Adorno *Dialectics* 192)

This part of *Negative Dialectics* is colored, as is exhibited here, with repeated claims that pain and suffering *should* have the power to weigh on thought. Adorno invokes what he calls the physical moment that “tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. ‘Woe speaks: ‘Go.’” (*Dialectics* 203). Negativity has been, at least since Hegel, the power that moves dialectical thinking; Adorno does not hesitate now to include pain as a partner to negativity in fueling dialectical thought. Moreover, he explicitly introduces pain as a model upon which negativity can be understood, at least as regards human experience. Thus it seems that the physical moment that invades thought is not exactly an invasion, or not unexpected: there is something definitive about the way in which Adorno links suffering to thinking and to a larger social context.<sup>9</sup> He writes,

It [the idea that thought is modeled after physical experience] is the somatic element’s survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move, the unassuaged unrest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge. Conscious unhappiness is not a delusion of the mind’s vanity but something inherent in the mind, the one authentic dignity it has received in its separation from the body. This dignity is the mind’s negative reminder of its physical aspect; its capability of that aspect is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have. The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of how thought is always already contaminated by objectivity, see Simon Jarvis, “What Is Speculative Thinking?,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 63.277 (2004).

would talk us out of that suffering.... (Adorno *Dialectics* 202)<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, disparate realms come together: subjectivity and objectivity, the individual, thought, and the social. The somatic element is acknowledged to be a constitutive moment for knowledge, characterized as unassuaged because it arises in the mind's recognition of the discrepancy between its understanding of itself as in essence abstraction, yet it still retains a physical moment. Although feeling is not entirely renderable in thought, it is nonetheless possible for thought to respond to it. Adorno is indicating that it is people's capacity to feel that provides the possibility of "hope" and "dignity." These two words are charged with intense ethical-moral connotations, and Adorno employs them in order to draw on the affective response that they carry, as will be made more explicit below. Through his rhetorical linguistic choices, he makes his philosophical discourse rhetorically-methodologically serve the ethical-moral aspirations of his critiques. It is an affective response to his texts that can open up social critique that resists the way systems impact intelligibility and legitimacy and cause the suffering of subjects. To work toward the alleviation of suffering thus implies an emotional response on the part of one waging a critique, and the painful (and perhaps pleasurable) impact that objective conditions bring to bear on living human beings must be part of the evaluation of social systems. A way of measuring such effects is not offered by Adorno, as it is not up to thought to try to quantify the painful experiences of anyone. Further, "senseless suffering" exceeds determinations of meaning that we might use to cover over or otherwise manage pain that ought to be alleviated. For Adorno, thought *has a constitutive responsibility* to respond to the existence of this

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<sup>10</sup> This passage bears more than a passing resemblance to the claims of Audre Lorde in "Poetry is not a Luxury," which I discuss in my Conclusion.

suffering. I would thus argue that Adorno offers a method that points in the direction of how thought is able to recognize the existence of suffering as objective, in the sense of objectivity delineated here: incapable of being thought away.

Before moving on to my discussion of morality below, I think it is crucial to think through the kind of “hope” that can be engendered through a dialectic that engages suffering. Despite his skepticism regarding the possibility of something like utopia, as he feared that the positing of a utopian project tended dangerously toward fascism, Adorno does make some use of the concept of hope, for instance in the final line of the essay “Why Still Philosophy?,” “History promises no salvation and offers the possibility of hope only to the concept whose movement follows history’s path to the very extreme” (Adorno *Models* 17).<sup>11</sup> Understanding this discussion of hope is enhanced by consulting two differing attempts to account for the role of suffering in Adorno’s work, one by Axel Honneth and another by Deborah Cook. In “A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno’s Social Theory,” Axel Honneth offers an account of the role of suffering in Adorno’s work that seeks to justify from the perspective of reason why humans should be called to redress suffering. Honneth argues that for Adorno, suffering is a category of thinking that holds the potential for people to be able to experience the damaging effects of oppressive social systems, despite the successes of objectification in subjects and the prevalence, academically as well as socially, of identitarian thinking. Honneth argues that the failure of identitarian thinking can be asserted inasmuch as individuals can experience what Honneth calls the “deformation of their reason,” and thus experience, not just become a product of,

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<sup>11</sup> A “concept whose movement follows history’s path to the very extreme” might be a succinct expression of Adorno’s use of Auschwitz, which I take up more in my third section below.

reification. He writes, “The concept of ‘suffering’ that Adorno employed is not meant in the sense of noting an explicit, linguistically articulated experience; rather, it is “transcendentally” presupposed everywhere there is the justified suspicion that human beings experience a loss of their self-realization and happiness through the restriction of their rational capacities” (Honneth 60). Honneth indicates that suffering can be expressed in cognition, but rather, what is significant about suffering is that its intractable presence indicates the continued capability of people to recognize harmful limitations imposed by the world. Moreover, although Adorno has introduced a physical model for suffering, Honneth argues that suffering as a concept operates on a conceptual or theoretical level. By saying that it is “transcendentally presupposed” wherever a person’s sense of fulfillment is inhibited, Honneth provides an explanation grounded in reason for how suffering is hopeful: its presence, and the cognitive recognition of that presence, prove that reason has the capacity to overcome harmful identity-thinking by accessing a moment outside of the strictures of identitarian thought. This moment is identified as hopeful because on Honneth’s reading, the rational response to suffering is to seek its eradication. Reason can access suffering because, as has been stated, thinking contains a physical moment. This never, for Honneth, diminishes its character as rational; what he is calling the suffering impulses are the subjective potential to resist coercive and dangerous social conditions, by drawing on objectivity as it has been constituted by negative dialectics.

While I appreciate Honneth’s reading of the transcendental role of suffering outlined above, as will be detailed more fully in my sections below, I would be wary of taking such a strictly rationalist perspective to bear on the role of suffering in Adorno’s work. The potentiality inherent in cognizing objectivity is explicated with more

attention to an indeterminacy at work in conceptualization by Deborah Cook in her essay “From the Actual to the Possible: Non-Identity Thinking.” Cook describes the presence in Adorno’s thought of what she calls “emphatic concepts,” which on her view “disclose possibilities that are neither fully actual, because experience negates them, nor fully nonactual, precisely because they are gleaned through such experience in resistance to it. In other words, these concepts arise through the negation of what is negative” (Cook “Actual” 30). These concepts, according to Cook, arise out of the conceptual cognition of the material world, and thus *exist*, although not fully manifested. That is, although identitarian thought demands of the world that it capitulate to its expectations of the domination of thinking over objectivity, it is also the case that negative dialectical thinking can locate advantageous potentiality in the material world that has yet to manifest. She writes, “...As critical, nonidentity thinking negates the negative, thereby giving rise to emphatic concepts whose ‘positivity’ consists in indirect allusions to a world that is not identical with this one” (Cook “Actual” 30). Cook’s discussion of emphatic concepts nicely identifies an important quality of negative dialectical thinking: conceptual thought of material reality is capable of cognizing not just what is, but also what could be, so the hope for the eradication of suffering is already connected with the existence of material and social conditions in the world, which must then be recognized. If suffering is conceived as an objective aspect of subjectivity, it can appear in a negative dialectic as an emphatic concept that points toward the possible alleviation of suffering through critical reflection on the world leading to actual social changes, and thus the alteration of the objective, material conditions of the world.<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with Adorno’s claim in *Negative Dialectics*

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<sup>12</sup> Cook further develops her analysis of the importance of social change in Adorno’s

that specific materialism, the kind that he advocates for over a naïve materialism, is linked with criticism, which he calls “social change in practice” (Cook "Actual" 31-32). Cook’s thinking explains that, for Adorno, objectivity as it is right now, despite the problems of identitarian thinking and reification, may be damaged, but it contains a potential to which critical thought can respond by employing emphatic concepts.

For my purposes, in thinking about suffering, I would say further that in the second major section of *Negative Dialectics*, “Concepts and Categories,” suffering arises as the primary category for evaluating social conditions, allowing Adorno to explicitly associate society, the welfare of individual human beings, and philosophical thought. Through the efforts to think critically about one’s world, a moment can emerge that cognizes reality not just as it is, but how it could possibly be, which is facilitated by taking up the disconnect between the potential for things to be different and their current determinations. In respect to this kind of thinking, the human person can function like an object for philosophic reflection, and cognition can disclose the potentiality for the mitigation of suffering through critical reflection on social processes. As befits his critical and negative methodology, Adorno does not proscribe how this is to be done, exactly. What he does is address the way in which philosophical theory, if it is to be responsible to the suffering of people, can *respond* to that suffering without attempting to *appropriate* it. Adorno, as I hope has been shown, is adamant that philosophy must learn how to respond to the oppression of human subjects. For instance, he writes “...a sense of shame bids philosophy not to repress George Simmel’s insight that its history shows amazingly few indications of the sufferings of humankind” (Adorno *Dialectics* 203). According to the analysis I present above, philosophy can

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thought in Deborah Cook, "'Ein Reaktionäres Schwein? Political Activism and Prospects for Change in Adorno'," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 62.277 (2004).



accomplish this while remaining an abstract theoretical discourse, because it can take hold of the way that the concept of suffering, as objective in the way that has been discussed, can be attested to and responded to without needing to be fully understood. This changes, perhaps, a philosophical understanding of the scope of reason; by allowing for the theoretical recognition of subjectivity as objective for subjects, Adorno allows for the possibility of engaging in critical social discourse in a way that is responsible to the not entirely or expressly rational claims of individuals, not only because something like suffering can become an object, but because reasonable thought, on this analysis, is already contaminated by objectivity.

Section two: a critical ethics, woe speaks, go?

To begin my more express engagement with the relation between ethical and critical thought in Adorno's work, I explore how his treatment of the physical aspects of human experience relates to his engagement with moral philosophy in his 1963 lectures on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, published as *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Adorno frames his treatment of morality in terms of the question: "...whether the good life is a genuine possibility in the present, or whether we shall have to make do with the claim I made in that book [*Minima Moralia*] that 'there can be no good life within the bad one' (Adorno *Dialectics* 153). He chooses to explore the concept *moral* in his lectures, rather than what he claims is the more popular term *ethical*, on the grounds that the concept of morality allows him to confront the contradiction inherent in any treatment of the relationship of the particular to the universal, which for him is a central concern of moral theory.

Ethics, on Adorno's view, ameliorates this concern by understanding only the

relationship between one's own existence and the mores and customs of one's social-historical situation, taking those conditions as a given.<sup>13</sup> Since, on his view, present social circumstances are degraded, what is needed is a way to successfully critique the conditions that make just or correct actions, on his terms, impossible.<sup>14</sup> While I am not convinced that his preference of one term over the other holds in all cases, I do want to take up Adorno's reasons for choosing one over the other. That is, I do not follow Adorno in adopting the term moral over ethical, but I do think that the conceptual structure of his analysis attends to the kinds of concerns that continue to serve ethical, social, political critique. In the first place, he questions the field in which something like a moral position could be maintained, insisting that critical distance from sanctioned social goods is necessary for moral theory. This will lead Adorno to the extreme of saying, for example, "On the question of whether moral philosophy is possible today, the only thing I would be able to say is that essentially it would consist in the attempt to make conscious the critique of moral philosophy, the critique of its options and an awareness of its antinomies" (Adorno *Problems* 163). It is perhaps thinking like this that lead critics of Adorno to be concerned with the status of normativity in his thought; if it is the case that Adorno's work does have the "ethical intensity" I referred to above, yet a normative claim requires that one be able to appeal to an account of the good in order to

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Adorno is thinking of a kind of virtue ethics, as in Aristotle's, in which excellence is defined only with regard to the community to which one belongs; see for instance Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999). It is possible this concern would also extend to American Pragmatism; in "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," Adorno argues that American pragmatism makes "practical applicability" the criteria for knowledge, and so abandons theoretical rigor in favor of a shallow expediency; see Adorno, *Models* 259.

<sup>14</sup> There is a nice connection to Gayatri Spivak's idea of planetarity here, which I discuss in my fourth chapter below.

be justified, then Adorno's methodology might be undercutting its own goals.<sup>15</sup> My position here is that the force of Adorno's "ethical intensity" is found in what Fabian Freyenhagen calls the "negativistic strategy" for defending Adorno against what Freyenhagen calls the "normativity problem," which maintains that the denunciation of the bad is adequate for Adorno's "minimalist ethics" (Freyenhagen "Adorno's Ethics" 145).<sup>16</sup> Freyenhagen rightly points out the negativity of Adorno's method and the importance of contextualization in Adorno's thinking must be preserved in any attempt to explore a possible normativity in Adorno's thought; he is never seeking a trans-historical account of the ethical good, but nonetheless is carving out a way to articulate a need for resistance. He does not, however, offer details of the shape of such a resistant position, or indicate the course one should take in refiguring society. I suggest here that one should not a traditional account of ethics in Adorno's thought, but instead use it to develop critique that retains an ethical force. An example of how such a "forceful" invocation of negativity can be put to work in social critique is explicated by Judith Butler in her treatment of Adorno in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. As I discussed in chapter one above, Butler argue that for critique is required of the social world and of the categories of ethical theory before any suggestions regarding action could be rightly

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<sup>15</sup> This concern that Adorno's method is lacking in any normative ground, and hence cannot justify its own interests in something like justice, are probably best known from Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. See for instance Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society (Cambridge: Polity, 1984). See also Seyla Benhabib, Critique, Norm and Utopia a Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Freyenhagen is concerned in his essay to defend what he calls Adorno's ethics of resistance more successfully than had James Gordon Finlayson; both seem committed to the idea that there is something in Adorno to be preserved in setting out a traditional seeming ethics that has virtues or guidelines for actions, although Freyenhagen's account is much more careful with the negativity and historical nature of Adorno's claims. See James Gordon Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," European Journal of Philosophy 10.1 (2002).

justified. As Butler points out, Adorno's use of the category "inhuman" in his *Problems of Moral Philosophy* is such a critique, as it performs a corrective gesture to a certain historically degraded concept of the human. She is concerned with the idea that self-assertion (aligned with egoistic or autonomous subjectivity) asserts the self at the expense of others and at the expense of the ethical possibilities of the world in general, creating a sense of the human that quickly devolves into moral narcissism (Butler 105). In the face of such a problem, Adorno calls for an anti-human gesture. The inhuman is not an idealized position; thus, the inhuman is an immanent critique of the human, a way of describing societal forces sedimented inside of us, forces that impede self-knowledge and hence impede ethical praxis. Denouncing the inhuman is a more productive strategy than trying to value a defined "human," which would require the re-assertion of a stable and idealized self. The inhuman is embodied when one critiques, for instance, the idea of a pure will, and hence the inhuman position is a strategy toward becoming "human" in a renewed and less decimated sense (Butler 106). What is significant about Adorno's use of a method of critique is that by utilizing a dialectic relationship between the human and inhuman, he avoids positing an already problematized notion of autonomy as the solution to dehumanization, or an uncritical sense of the good so that there can be a clear 'in the name of' towards which to orient resistance (Butler 107). Rather, what Adorno states in *Negative Dialectics* is that he wants to draw on "the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity" (Adorno *Dialectics* xx). Adorno utilizes a method that begins with a critical reflection on the world, rather than an already constituted sense of morality, appealing to the force that can be engendered through critical engagement with discontinuities between subjects and objects, as I suggested above in my treatment of suffering. I suggest in my reading

of Adorno below that this is the ethical force of his thought—not a new normativity, but a methodology for engaging in critique.

Adorno's treatment of moral theory thus asserts that a philosophical engagement with ethical or moral values requires a social and political dimension in order to adequately think the problem of how a 'rightly lived life' could be possible. As he states toward the end of his lecture series:

...no one can promise the reflections that can be entertained in the realm of moral philosophy can be used to establish a canonical plan for the good life because life itself is so deformed and distorted that no one is able to live the good life in it or to fulfill his destiny as a human being. Indeed, I would almost go so far as to say that, given the way the world is organized, even the simplest demand for integrity and decency must necessarily lead almost everyone to protest. I believe that only by making this situation a matter of consciousness—rather than covering it up with stickling plaster—will it be possible create the conditions in which we can properly formulate questions about how we should lead our lives today. The only thing that can perhaps be said is that the good life today would consist in resistance to the forms of the bad life that have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds. (Adorno *Problems* 163)

This passage makes clear that to Adorno's thinking traditional philosophical accounts of ethical theory are inadequate to his historical reality. He makes clear that his treatment of morality will not present norms or values that lead to the good life, but rather, will initiate a critical interrogation of whether the historical grounds exist that could support something like correct actions. Moral philosophy can *only* take a critical form, one that tries to determine the fields in which moral choices could be considered and to identify the limitations of commonly held moral beliefs. If there is a moment of 'hope' here, or a movement toward the dreaded proscription, it is in the call to cultivate an

intentional awareness and rumination of the discontinuities between the inherited idea that people should be able to lead the good life and the inability to conceive of a way toward such a life.<sup>17</sup> A philosophical investigation of morality must then set the conditions to resist pre-established ideology stepping in occluding negative, critical thought. It is the responsibility of such a philosophical endeavor to attempt to craft categories of analysis that contribute to a critique of the ethical, political, social conditions that condition actions that exposes the limitations of morality, or make them “a matter of consciousness.” That this project would center around resistance, as I will discuss further below, will follow from Adorno’s insight that too much identification with the status quo leads to complicity with immoral states of affairs. As is clear from his criticisms of Fichte’s claim that morality is self-evident, Adorno is highly suspicious of any claim to know or grasp the good; for Adorno, an immediate grasping of “the good” could occur if one’s class identity aligns with prevailing norms and values, as was the case with turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois philosophers (Adorno *Problems* 167-68). Rather, Adorno calls us to attend to the analyses already at work in the world, being produced by others, “the most progressive minds,” whose critics have exposed how these bad forms of life tend to work.

To this end, moral philosophy for Adorno must manage the tricky position of engaging the practical while remaining theoretical; it must think in historically specific terms about the relationship of the universal to the particular; it must concern itself with the question of the production of consciousness or subjectivity while keeping a

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<sup>17</sup> If I had more time I would like to bring this ideas into conversation with the insights in Sara Ahmed’s recent publication *The Promise of Happiness*, where she writes “...from a position of skeptical disbelief in happiness as a technique for living well.” Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 2.

critical distance that tries to resist parroting the status quo (Adorno *Problems* 5). Moral philosophy retains at least one aspect of its classic determination, in the sense that it tries to bridge thought, with its tendency toward idealization, and practice, with its susceptibility to normative power. One way that Adorno addresses the seeming disconnect between these two spheres is through his invocation of an *irrational* aspect to moral thinking. Taking up this question of the *practical* for Adorno does not simply need to engage decisions, actions and their effects; for him, that there is an irrational aspect to morality entails engaging non-theoretical, non-rational aspects of human experience. The relationship between thought and what thought thinks about is a common concern in Adorno's work; I have already treated one occurrence of this problem in Adorno's work, that of conceptually accounting for the corporeal, in Adorno's reflections on suffering. With regard to moral theory, his refrain that matter and thought are not reducible to each other despite their deep interrelation is taken up in the context of Kant's moral philosophy, in trying to mark how a person is *moved* into action. This enigmatic feature of life is described variously as freedom, spontaneity, irrationality, resistance, and conviction; in each case, he is attempting to name a dimension of life that exceeds the tendencies of theory and action that I referred to above. For instance, reflecting on the question of theory and practice, he writes,

...however inseparable these two distinct disciplines—theory and practice—may be, since after all they both have their source in life itself, there is one further factor necessary for practice that is not fully explicable by theory and that is very hard to isolate. And I should like to emphasize it because I regard it as fundamental to a definition of the moral. We may perhaps best define it with the term spontaneity, the immediate, active reaction to particular situations. (Adorno *Problems* 5)

What is at stake in this analysis is the possible role of extra-conceptual dimensions of experience for critical philosophy. Thus, the way of treating immediacy that I discussed above should guide the way spontaneity is read in Adorno's critique of moral philosophy. In order to understand the meaning of the term "moral," and detail its ramifications for a critical philosophy, he needs to be able to at least pinpoint the *significance* of what he calls this "irrational aspect of moral action" (Adorno *Dialectics* 172). Toward this end, he writes, "...one task of the theory of the moral is to set limits to the scope of theory itself, in other words, to show that the sphere of moral action includes something that cannot fully be described in intellectual terms, but also that should not be turned into an absolute" (Adorno *Problems* 7). There are a couple significant features to this moral determination of an "irrational" aspect for theory. First, this allows a thinker to structurally recognize the limitations of theory, and keep in mind that thinking does not entirely cover or master the world. Attention to this helps contribute to a cultivation of theoretical humility: the recognition that anyone's thinking can be incomplete, fail to take into account particular circumstances, and have a hard time recognizing the stakes of other points of view. Further, a commitment to continually acknowledging the limits of theory's reach marks a continued commitment to critique, to recognizing that ethical, social, political philosophies must constantly re-subject themselves to an analysis of their premises, methodologies, and criteria for evidence.

Given this concern with setting responsible limits for moral thinking, and his insistence that "...anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world," it makes sense that Adorno develops an account of this non-conceptual moment of spontaneity as *resistance* (Adorno *Problems* 6). He states,



“Now what I wish to emphasize is the factor of resistance, of refusing to be part of the prevailing evil, a refusal that always implies resisting something stronger and hence always an element of despair” (Adorno *Problems* 176). This despair is explained through the example of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and stage a military coup on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1944 (Adorno *Problems* 7-8).<sup>18</sup> Adorno recounts in his lecture that he questioned one of the actors in this coup as to how he was able to go forward, despite the unlikelihood of success. Adorno understands this as a question of *motivation*, of how to move from a belief or a conviction in the ethical, political, social wrongness of the Third Reich to actions against them. On his view, the idea that the Third Reich was evil was a “critical and theoretical insight.” The conviction, however, “...for whatever reason—that things cannot go on like this...” is not simply theoretical or rational. This feature “introduces something alien into moral philosophy, something that does not quite fit, precisely because moral philosophy tends to overlook such matters” (Adorno *Problems* 8).

To adequately address this idea of conviction, Adorno distinguishes between an ethics of conscience which he aligns with a Kantian abstract ethics and an ethics of responsibility, attributed to a Hegelian concern with consequences and results. On his view, both are insufficient. An ethics of conviction easily turns into its own opposite, making it difficult to tell the difference between the principle for its own sake and one’s own ego, pride, desires—the general slides into the particular (Adorno *Problems* 8). This position also carries the danger that attends to positions that present themselves as *pure*, as “...a pure moral demand can by virtue of its own purity be transformed into evil” (Adorno *Problems* 161-63). On this analysis, the ethics of responsibility has a

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<sup>18</sup> I will address Adorno’s treatment of the Third Reich in more detail in the section that follows.

slightly different problem: it tends toward collusion with the existing order, as “...by taking consequences into account, there is a sense in which moral philosophy does make itself dependent on external reality” and “impl[ies] an accommodation of the world just as it happens to be” (Adorno *Problems* 158). Neither of these two modes of moral thought can for Adorno serve to confront the problem summed up in the phrase, there can no good life in the bad one. Moral philosophy, then, must break out of these paradigms to account for conviction and resistance, prefaced as they are on irrational determinations.

Conviction, then, is an example of a different consciousness of moral problems, one that better addresses the problem of the ‘wrong state of things’ because it contains with it a movement toward resistant praxis. As Adorno explains in his “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” praxis is seen by many people to be in tension with reflection (Adorno *Models* 259). He suggests that people can latch on to praxis as a saving grace, as a means of resisting, crying out against hellish conditions, but the real need was a need for praxis, not just activity (Adorno *Models* 262). Praxis has to be aimed at politics, at social systems—at the structures that try to make it impossible for individual actions to matter (Adorno *Models* 263). Good theory surpasses just trying to solve problems, because it calls for thinking beyond the constraints of what is already given; thus, it can be a “transformative and practical productive force” (Adorno *Models* 264). On this analysis, what is ultimately most *useful* will not necessarily be the thinking that tries to find solutions to problems. However, even ethical thought that attends to the dialectic of theory and praxis cannot *produce* conviction. That is, there is no purely rational argument that can lead from the recognition *that* something is wrong to the feeling that *I* am implicated in it, or that I should *do something* about that wrongness. Theory can

help to articulate the disconnect between the idea of the good life and its possibility but it does not offer a formula that engenders conviction. I suggest below, somewhat tentatively, that while no philosophical analysis can or should want to produce an ethical position, the intentional incorporation of affect into the presentation of an ethical analysis can help better to set the conditions for conviction to happen. The goal of such a project would not be a set of moral virtues, or a political program so much as the inculcation of an affect-attentive engagement with ethical, social and political conditions.

### Section three: the problem of Auschwitz, affect and critique

In order to further track the relationships between bad conditions and the production of resistant consciousness with a greater attention to affect, I now turn to Adorno's invocations of Auschwitz in his 1965 lecture course, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, and the sections of *Negative Dialectics* to which these lectures correlate. Adorno's use of Auschwitz offers a comportment for thinking the proper contextualization and representation of 'the bad life;' I suggest here that the argumentative force, the persuasion, of Adorno's thinking relies on an affective, moral force that is neither simply or purely rational, nor reducible to pre-rationality as such. He thus methodologically embraces the irrational aspect I argued above is so crucial to resistant moral thinking by using affective rhetoric to open up and sustain a critique of metaphysics, for instance when he states that one cannot live after Auschwitz, or that Hitler has imposed upon humanity a new categorical imperative, that Auschwitz never happen again (Adorno *Dialectics* 363, 65). In these lectures, Adorno claims that historical developments have imposed a kind of materialism on both metaphysics and morality. "Auschwitz" for him

invokes many changes, including a historical change in the world in terms of social relations, a change in the possibilities of metaphysical thinking, and the conditions for a critical moral imperative. I focus here on how Adorno develops a theoretical comportment or frame for thinking characterized by an acknowledged complicity with violence, which Adorno names *guilt*. What emerges is not simply a critique of violence, but a way of conceiving of the moral that keeps alive the tension between reason and unreason, through the intentional invocation of an affective state. Such a frame helps work towards the conditions in which resistant thinking can happen, if the end of resistance is not simply believing that something is wrong or hastily acting out against power, but a praxis that aims to refigure social conditions.

In terms of its historical determinations, when Adorno uses the name *Auschwitz* he invokes the attempted genocide of the European Jews during WWII, particularly as it was perpetrated through the mechanized cruelty and horror of the concentration camps.<sup>19</sup> But Auschwitz as an idea for a negative dialectics extends beyond that particular historical event to encompass “the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz” (Adorno *Problems* 163), a world “which knows of things far worse than death and denies people the shot in the neck in order to torture them slowly to death” (Adorno *Problems* 105). That is, for Adorno, Auschwitz names a transition towards widespread dehumanization in the objective social, cultural and political conditions of human existence. This “world of torture” is also characterized by the use of the atom bomb and the Vietnam war (Adorno *Metaphysics* 104), and “Auschwitz” for

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<sup>19</sup> Here I try to take account of the metaphysical ramifications of the kinds of historical conditions Adorno indicates through the name of Auschwitz, rather than focus on Auschwitz as a site of a discrete historical event. A much fuller treatment of Adorno’s use of Auschwitz and defense of the new categorical imperative can be found in J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). esp. Chapter 8.

Adorno is a sign<sup>20</sup> that indicates “that culture has failed us to its very core”(Adorno *Metaphysics* 101-02, 04). The significance of this is that Auschwitz names for him a material change in the possibility of human experience as such, regardless of one’s proximity to this particular event; Adorno stated, “there can be no one, whose organ of experience has not entirely atrophied, for whom the world after Auschwitz, that is, the world in which Auschwitz was possible, is the same world as it was before” (Adorno *Metaphysics* 118). “Auschwitz” understood in these terms is clearly a common concern for 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers.<sup>21</sup> However, the use of Auschwitz as a paradigmatic historical horror has also often critiqued, and I would suggest rightly so. My analysis here is skeptical about the use of Auschwitz as the *paradigmatic* social catastrophe of the 20th century and beyond. For instance, an important counter-perspective to Adorno’s is offered by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract*. The project of Mills’ book is to re-introduce into the history of Western political philosophy a neglected account of the role of race in the theorization and actualization of traditional Western political systems; his book defends the claim that “White Supremacy is the unnamed political

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno specifically calls Auschwitz a sign, not a *symbol*, possibly because the word symbol denotes a representation of meaning, which is what Adorno is arguing against in these lectures. Sign should be taken then as an indication without a strong sense of determination.

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, and many others have written of struggling with how so much death and violence could have been dealt out, with such senseless yet ostensibly *reasonable* justification and lasting impact. One could compile an extensive and cumbersome list of 20<sup>th</sup> century engagements with the Third Reich; here I simply gesture to a few. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994). Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007). Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian Mcleod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Adriaan T. Peperzack, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

system that has made the modern world what it is today” (Mills 1). In his final chapter, when he reflects on the larger ramifications of his theory of racial contract, he notes

...the despairing question of how there can be poetry after Auschwitz evokes the puzzled nonwhite reply of how there could have been poetry *before* Auschwitz, and *after* the killing fields in America, Africa, Asia. The standpoint of Native America, black Africa, colonial Asia, has always been aware that European civilization rests on extra-European barbarism, so that the Jewish Holocaust, the “Judeocide” (Mayer), is by no means a bolt from the blue, an unfathomable anomaly in the development of the West, but unique only in that it represents use of the Racial Contract against *Europeans*. I say this in no way to diminish its horror, of course, but to deny its *singularity*, to establish its conceptual identity with other policies carried out by Europe in non-Europe for hundreds of years, but using methods less efficient than those made possible by advanced mid-twentieth century industrial society. (Mills 102-03)

It seems to me productive to maintain, as Mills also suggests, that there is something politically and culturally significant about the mechanized torture of the Nazi regimes, particularly because of the connection Adorno draws between these practices and the necessary fungibility of workers under capitalist means of production. However, I follow Mills in being skeptical about the accuracy or the efficacy of calling this genocidal project “new,” or singular, while certainly that was Adorno’s position. As Mills points out, thinkers who engage with non-Anglo/a, non-European contexts have too-little trouble pointing out other materially significant genocides perpetuated *by this same political culture*. Thus, in turning to Adorno’s own ruminations on the concentration camps, I do not want to push that concern to the side. The loss of not just Jewish but also gay lives and political resisters of all kinds clearly meant that life under the Third Reich’s regime was devastating. To say so does not, I suggest,

legitimate the use of this proper name to indicate that particular loss as more important than any others, as more significant than others, or as a paradigmatic mode of violence.

In a both/and move, then, in which I keep this concern on the table, here I will ask after what might be gained by considering Adorno's incendiary claims about the effects of Auschwitz. My treatment of his use of Auschwitz is not arguing that it is a singular historical event, but that it is a privileged sign in his work, a political and personal pain that Adorno was engaging from a place of historical exigency. Because of this, his treatment of this sign can be extrapolated from to think more generally about the possibilities of ethical critique. As he writes,

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives. (Adorno *Dialectics* 365)

To my mind, this passage rests on Adorno's qualification of *now*; that is, his claim that the body is the proper source of moral guidance should be thought in the context of his critique of the legacy of rationalism in philosophy, as it slides into identitarianism.

Kant's categorical imperative, of course, would grant moral authority only to those principles which reason can justify by appeal to universalization, and it mandates that any individual should treat others as an end in themselves, never simply as a means. In Adorno's invocation, the unimpeachable imperative has switched alignment from the

mind to the body. In either case, he asserts, the ultimate justification for this moral force escapes us; when one seeks an ultimate ground for the moral law, it is not there. Critical moral philosophy then should not be concerned with grounding moral claims, but rather situate itself in an attentive manner toward its own historical conditions. Adorno pushes beyond the problem of the antinomic character of Kant's reason to argue that given the 'wrong state of things' of which dialectics is the ontology and the cultural crisis to which Enlightenment has been pushed, reason cannot guide anyone toward the good. The thinker who at times defends theory against praxis, as I discussed above, when caught up in the question of the Nazi concentration camps despairs of rationality, and looks to physical aversion as a corrective gesture to the evacuation of individuality that he suggest was a tactic of dehumanization that allowed for systematic genocide. With Adorno there is no ultimate privilege of either the subject or object, but the need to think their mediation and correct for dominance. In this context, the moral addendum, the irrecoverable aspect of moral life discussed above as spontaneity, is sought in embodiment; this is why materialism and metaphysics merge in Adorno's discussion of Auschwitz. As there is an evacuation of the meaning of individuality in its Enlightenment determination—that in one's individuality is one's dignity—Adorno mines corporeality for resistance to the damage reason has wrought.

His invocation of the physical side of dialectics extends into his description of the objective social conditions that follow from Auschwitz, which for Adorno should be described as a "context of social guilt," a "hellish unity" that results in "total entrapment" (Adorno *Metaphysics* 110-11; Adorno *Dialectics* 362). He uses highly emotional language to try to sketch the scope of what he conceived of as a cultural failure, to gesture to the objective condition that anyone who lives in a world



characterized by this guilt does so only under the condition that his life is lived at the expense of others, “that just by continuing to live one is taking away that possibility from someone else, to whom life has been denied; that one is stealing that person’s life” (Adorno *Metaphysics* 108, 04, 26).<sup>22</sup> The ubiquity and inescapable character of this guilt is objective on Adorno’s analysis because its determination ultimately cannot be eradicated through subjective mechanisms, as I discussed in my first section above. This irreducible quality of materiality is meant by Adorno to be a weight that people have to bear, which is why he goes on to discuss guilt as what ought to characterize experience ‘after Auschwitz.’ Adorno writes,

Guilt reproduces itself in each of us—and what I am saying is addressed to us as subjects—since we cannot possibly remain fully conscious of this connection at every moment of our waking life. If we—each of us sitting here—knew at every moment what has happened to us and to what concatenations we owe our own existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong, simply by having neglected, through fear, to help other people at a crucial moment, for example—a situation very familiar to me from the time of the Third Reich—if one were fully aware of all these things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed, as it were, into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt. By failing to be aware at every moment of what threatens and what has happened, one also contributes to it; one resists it too little; and it can be repeated and reinstated at any moment. (Adorno *Metaphysics* 112-13)

Adorno states quite baldly that the magnitude of the horrors included under the name of Auschwitz, if present in our everyday lives, would make living impossible. Yet he presents a call to think the discontinuity between the magnitude of the loss and one’s own psychic capabilities as part of an ethical analysis. The violence and loss are too

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<sup>22</sup> A similar argument is made in *Negative Dialectics* 364

much to be taken up, and all that can easily be said is that there is a certain universality to the incapacity to respond “authentically” or totally to these historical events.<sup>23</sup> It seems important to note that there are limits to the usefulness of this analysis for continuing to think contemporary social-political relations: of primary concern to me, it runs the risk of leveling out all complicity with violence, when it might be more productive to maintain an awareness of the differential distribution of social privileges. I provisionally suggest here that this analysis of the guilt context is one thing that makes Adorno’s ruminations on Auschwitz useful for thinking through the possible force of ethical, political, social critique. Adorno’s characterization of the role of violence in social conditions situates complicity with a world of torture, that is, guilt, as an objective condition of human existence, even when one is at a certain distance from violence itself. This is why Adorno insists on a metaphysical analysis, one that “is addressed to us as subjects,” that is, should be taken up as a structural, not simply individual, determination. An individual personality practically requires the defense mechanisms that shut down such a realization of complicity. Thus, the concept *guilt* denotes that a social subject bears a relationship to the violence undertaken to maintain the conditions of his social world. Outside of an Adornian context, I prefer the language of *complicity* to *guilt*, as the connotations of psychological guilt within many current social political contexts indicate that it can help support rather than disrupt privilege. Audre Lorde, for example, argues that guilt is counter-productive to the solidarity required to resist social oppressions, noting that “Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures” (Lorde 124). If

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<sup>23</sup> Important concerns about the universality of Adorno’s social critique with regard to the problem of militarized Israeli nationalism and U.S. neo-Imperialism are addressed in Gene Ray, “Conditioning Adorno: “After Auschwitz” Now,” *Third Text* 18.4 (2004): 229-30. (229-30)

Lorde is correct to align guilt and defensives as I suspect, then Adorno's conception of objective guilt has to be thought outside of a purely psychic context. That is, guilt must be understood to mark an objective condition that has a relationship to, but is not reducible to, a psychological experience. It represents for him a relationship to a discontinuity between one's own continued, perhaps rather comfortable existence, and what happened in order to ensure that comfort. For Adorno, then, the category of subjectivity has social and political meaning, as it indicates the relationship between the life one is able to live and the forces that craft the conditions for that life, as well as ethical ramifications, as it marks a way of being addressed by the history of one's present.

What is clear is that Adorno is arguing that his, and perhaps also our, historical time is characterized by a specificity with regard to metaphysics, such that "metaphysical experience, or the content of metaphysics—both in one—present themselves quite differently today" (Adorno *Metaphysics* 101-02). For Adorno, this problem of *meaning* has to be thought through metaphysics, in the first instance, because metaphysical assumptions that go un-thought or un-critiqued easily overwrite the experience or witness of suffering with ideology. Perhaps more crucially, though, Adorno asserts throughout the *Metaphysics* lectures that the philosophical legacy of metaphysical thinking in general is to ascribe meaning to life. He notes that the goal of what he calls older metaphysics is to understand "that which is," in order to be able to make certain claims in the face of the enigmatic and chaotic (Adorno *Metaphysics* 101). While Adorno sees a strand of ideological thinking in this history, he also sees the history of metaphysics as containing the valuable project of reason confronting and grappling with irrationality. The historical context he tries to describe under the name

Auschwitz, however, is one in which he asserts that faith in meaning is no longer possible (Adorno *Metaphysics* 104). Whether it ever was is truly an open question, as I mentioned above; after all, history heretofore can hardly be said to be lacking in atrocities. Nonetheless, Adorno takes up the specificity of his particular moment by claiming that to imply that there can be an overarching meaning to mechanized torture makes a mockery of victims; slightly later he calls such assertions immoral (Adorno *Metaphysics* 105). In this light, it's important to recognize the way that moral claims are part of the significance of Adorno's metaphysical critique. I choose to take this up not as a move that flattens out the world, but to take up the call to think through the relationships between our own most "secret experiences" and the fact that these things are allowed to happen.<sup>24</sup> If "old-style" Metaphysics posits meaning in order to render experiences intelligible, and thus justifies existence, it is for Adorno the task of metaphysical critique to expose the parameters of thought that limit openness to change. Thus, he points out that the question of morality arises within metaphysical analysis when we take a critical distance from the idea of meaning and take up the question of *what matters*, noting:

If one is not oneself capable at each moment of identification with the victims, and of alert awareness and remembrance, philosophy, in the necessary forms of its own reification, is perhaps the only form of consciousness which, by seeing through these matters and making them conscious in a more objective form, can at least do something, a small part of that which we are unable to do.  
(Adorno *Metaphysics* 104)

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<sup>24</sup> In a different yet compatibly context, Gayatri Spivak calls the ethics experience of the impossible, a 'secret encounter;' I discuss this in chapter three below.

On this thinking, what Adorno here names “philosophy” functions along the lines of what Gayatri Spivak might call an *enabling violation*, as I discuss in chapter three below. If complete identification with victims is impossible for reasons of psychic health, and if redressing what has happened is impossible given both the overwhelming force behind the violence and distances of space and time, then critical reflection is the best hope for grappling with immorality. It may admittedly seem too difficult to confront the relation between oneself and such objectively determined oppressive social conditions. Adorno’s thought at times seems to imply a pessimism that borders on hopelessness. However, I maintain that when Adorno’s thinking is read together with accounts such as Butler’s and Spivak’s which each offer extremely nuanced treatments of complicity with power, the critical possibilities of his materialism become more clear. The forgetfulness that Adorno calls a form of guilt can be encountered by making the mechanisms that produce forgetfulness available to critical reflection. The category of guilt and its displacement into the distinction between meaning and what matters thus captures the interrelation of ethics, politics, and the social that I am pursuing. Understanding the imbrications of historical, metaphysical and moral or ethical claims is essential because Adorno asserts that one cannot make a purely reasonable or rational argument about something like torture, especially under conditions of war. He states, “as soon as one attempts to provide a logical foundation for a proposition such as that one should not torture, one becomes embroiled in a bad infinity; and probably would even get the worst of the logical argument, whereas the truth in this proposition is precisely what falls outside such a dialectic” (Adorno *Metaphysics* 67-68). That is, instrumental reasoning can often provide a seemingly reasonable or logical argument in favor of harming others when faced with threats to security or future well-being. This is why Adorno

asserts that “the true basis of morality” is in “bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain” (Adorno *Metaphysics* 116). I argue that this is not the end of moral critique for Adorno, but rather marks its inauguration—this moment of physical identification is not produced by philosophical thought, but can be the non-cognitive spark that compels a serious and sustained resistant engagement with the world. The *significance* of suffering for ethical, social and political analysis, if not its justificatory meaning, can only be attended to through the critique of metaphysical positing and the recognition that the possibility of morality is imbricated with somatically informed thinking. Without a metaphysical critique, materiality, and hence suffering, can be relegated to the status of an “extra-logical element” which is “conjured away by philosophy and rationalism” (Adorno *Metaphysics* 117). But on Adorno’s view, this also conjures away the possibility of a moral response, as it is a physical aversion that informs the desire to alleviate suffering. For Adorno the proper frame for a philosophical treatment of suffering is one that can attend to suffering while engaging a morally and metaphysically informed materialist critique of abstract thought.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that Adorno’s account of suffering in a negative dialectic contributes productively to an ethical, social, political critique that seeks to disentangle social intelligibility and social legitimacy from each other and so work towards ameliorating the damaging effects of oppressive social systems. I first argued that Adorno’s account of the dialectic of subject and object engages not-quite rational aspects of human experiences in a way that exposes the mechanisms that produce social-political blindspots. Because a somatic experience like suffering is an objective-

subjective moment, it can impose upon theoretical, philosophical discourse that might otherwise favor universalizing abstractions. Theoretical cognition can thus be made more accountable to the concrete experiences of living human individuals because the subject is always mediated by objectivity, both vis-à-vis the world and in terms of the dialectics of subject and object internal to the subject.

I next argued that Adorno's treatment of the physical aspects of human experience leads him to treat moral theory and an analysis of social conditions together. In asking the question of whether "the good life" is possible under "bad conditions," Adorno shows himself to be suspicious of the possibility of the moral good as well as living a good life. Despite this suspicion, his negative methodology can still serve ethical critique. By drawing on my earlier account of Adorno's treatment of immediacy in conjunction with the dialectic of theory and praxis, I showed that Adorno's account of the role of conviction in moral resistance is one way that a philosophical account can engage, without over-determining, the non-rational aspects of human life. I thus claimed that the ethical force of Adorno's thought is found not in presenting a foundation for ethical claims, but in providing a methodology for engaging in critique.

My final argument showed the importance of affect for Adorno's critical philosophy by taking up his invocations of Auschwitz. Adorno has argued that the Third Reich inaugurated a period of materially supported 'guilt.' While Adorno argued that Hitler had imposed "a new categorical imperative upon mankind," I resisted asserting a singularity of the Jewish Holocaust. However, I argued that Adorno's use of the sign of Auschwitz models how resistant moral thinking can use affective rhetoric to open up and sustain a critique of metaphysics. Such a critique philosophically engages moral concepts while maintaining the tension between reason and unreason through the

intentional invocation of an affective state. As I indicated above, Adorno's account of guilt could have the effect of being overly paralyzing, so his analysis becomes more nuanced when thought in terms of complicity, as will become more clear in my next chapter when I turn to the work of Gayatri Spivak.

The amelioration of affective responses Adorno describes as the reification of the subject is part of the legacy of enlightenment thought he sets himself against. That legacy can support dehumanization and render some subjects more intelligible and/or legitimate. Thus, the mechanisms by which this differential humanity is bestowed requires critique. Adorno's thought is effective in offering a critique of traditional philosophical categories and exposing the ways their collusion with dominant oppressive logics perpetuates the suffering of the human subject. However, it is important also to engage with contingent social concerns, with the privileges and oppressions that mark particular global identities. Spivak's project demonstrates the involvement of philosophical projects of the Enlightenment with justifying the subjugation of those living in colonized countries, including Native North and South Americans, Indians and Africans. Further, she demonstrates how the continued use of ideas such as freedom and rights justify the invasion and occupation of postcolonial nations and the propagation of U.S. economic interests around the world. In the next chapter, I draw on her work as an example of an even more specific engagement with capitalist global dynamics and the kinds of affects that support them.



## Chapter Three: reading affectively in the work of Gayatri Spivak

### Introduction

In the Preface of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak remarks on the method of her theory by noting, “I am not erudite enough to be interdisciplinary, but I can break rules” (Spivak *Critique* xiii). This self-assessment of her academic style should not simply be taken at face value; it might be more accurate to suggest that Spivak is interested in breaking rules as the method of a kind of interdisciplinary critique. For instance, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* addresses canonical texts of Western philosophy, and one way Spivak’s reading breaks rules is in using some of the ‘great works’ of the western philosophical tradition to find “the structures of the production of postcolonial reason” (Spivak *Critique* xii). Further, her *Death of a Discipline* is an explicit engagement with protocols that could produce interdisciplinary work across the boundaries of Comparative Literature and Area Studies that better attends to the pressing need to think global justice. I thus turn here to Spivak as an avowed and disavowed interdisciplinary thinker who is interested in engaging the complicitous agency available to an academic. She develops a conception of ethical singularity as a way to bring an ethical force to supplement other kinds of theoretical and practical work. Such a supplementarity sketches the outline of an interdisciplinary critique that works for the just world that “we seem obliged to want” (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 537). By following through Spivak’s reflections on the role of the humanities in the imagining of global justice, or perhaps, using the imagination in the service of global justice, I suggest that ethical singularity for Spivak has to pose, rather than beg,

structural questions of power: the social, political, economic influences that condition the possibility of hearing another as a singular ethical voice. In such opening up of possible ways of reimagining ourselves along with an engagement with others, Spivak expands the possibility of intimacy appearing as a weight that could bear on the deep privileges of a world conditioned by global finance. Her critical, interrogatory gestures into ethical singularity expose, then, the ways that ethical, political and social concerns are all essential to her work; through attending to the careful ways that Spivak situates her project in relation to ‘something like justice,’ rather than a transparent and unquestioned ideal Justice, I offer here a reading of her work that supports my claim that simultaneous ethical, political, social critique best serves critical philosophy.

On my analysis, an ‘is and yet is not’ relation to academic disciplinarity such as I pointed to above is a responsible way for a thinker to sustain a concern with the enabling violation that is the privilege of academia. Here, I briefly sketch how Spivak situates herself with regard to postcolonial theory in order to display her concern with the power wielded by institutionalized knowledge production from the position of a producer of institutionalized theoretical knowledge.<sup>1</sup> It is important to recall that Spivak sets out to critique postcolonial, not simply colonial, reason.<sup>2</sup> That is, while she

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<sup>1</sup> There are two significant bodies of work I do not discuss here that would need to be taken up in a longer project. The first is feminism, especially transnational feminisms and queer feminisms, and the second, Marxism, particularly in terms of Marxist critiques of nationalisms and the role of religion in politics.

<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that Spivak is the only postcolonial thinker to take a critical stance toward postcolonialism from the perspective of thinking postcoloniality; such a critical position might be one hallmark of responsible theory in general, and in the context of postcolonial theory, as the editors of the special issue of *Social Text*, “Third World and Post-Colonial Issues” noted, postcolonial thinkers have for a long time been concerned with the “problematic implications” of the terms Third World and postcolonial John McClure and Aamir Mufti, “Introduction: Third World and Post-Colonial Issues,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 3. For varying critical perspectives of the

is undoubtedly a critic of colonialism, she also suggests that postcoloniality is not entirely sufficient for redressing the damaging effects of our global history of conquest. This has at least two dimensions: first, she introduces the project of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* as bringing to light the power dynamics of a world where the global north and global south are differentially affected by economics, arguing that this dynamic becomes more clear if one sees, "...the 'third world' as a displacement of the old colonies, as colonialism proper displaces itself into neocolonialism. ...The post-Soviet situation has moved this narrative into the dynamics of the financialization of the globe" (Spivak *Critique* 2-4). Spivak tracks how global power systems today have some analogous structures to those of colonialism, as global south economies continue to be dictated to by global north corporate interests. As Vandana Shiva has argued, the historical institution of what is called the global north or the first world was enabled by the destruction of India's textile industry, the domination of the spice trade by imperial powers, genocides of native peoples, and U.S chattel slavery (Shiva 22). All of this supported the economic success of the industrial revolution that helped ensure global north economic dominance. If Shiva's analysis holds, then the current global poor have

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postcolonial, see also Aijaz Ahmed, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), Ella Shoat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994), Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994), Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park, "Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism," *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

“not been left behind,” they have been “robbed,” and the exploitative practices of colonial governance can be understood to have carried over into current economic dynamics (Shiva 22).<sup>3</sup> Further, Spivak’s concern is not simply with historiographical or economic critique, but with discursive, theoretical analysis. Colonial discourses, as Lata Mani explained, are those that “...developed alongside, mediated, and helped secure European conquest and domination, and to the rhetorical strategies predominated in the representations of colonized peoples, societies, and cultures” (Mani 3). Following Spivak’s analysis of postcoloniality as neocoloniality, postcolonial discourse takes the place of colonial discourse to the extent that it names rhetorical strategies that continue to serve the consolidation of the power of the global north. This deploys the social and cultural representation of global south peoples, “as the new magisterium constructs itself in the name of the Other” (Spivak *Critique* 6-7). I return to this point below when I discuss Spivak’s analysis of the figure of the native informant. Here I simply wish to underscore that the significance of postcoloniality in Spivak’s thought remains an open question, and she is one of the voices in contemporary theory who insists that we keep our theoretical tools open for critique, as such an active comportment toward the conceptual tools of a theory is necessary to avoid adopting a stance that takes “acknowledgment of complicity as an inconvenience” (Spivak *Critique* xii). This is crucially important for those who occupy what Spivak shorthands as “NY classrooms,” who inhabit an episteme conditioned by privileges epistemological and ethical (structural) assumptions about the value of education. For an academic to take up a position that acknowledges complicity as part of a successful critique requires thinking

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<sup>3</sup> Recall for instance the interrelation of nation and the West India Company in the building of the British empire, and then consider how common it is for corporate practices to be supported by national and international law.

global oppressions in ways that do not perpetually return oneself to the top of a political, social and economic hierarchy.

In my argument below, I focus texts in which Spivak thinks ethics in terms of pedagogical and institutionally mediated possibilities, most notably *Death of a Discipline*, “Righting Wrongs,” and *Imperatives to Reimagine the Planet*. In section one, “Figures of epistemic discontinuities,” I use “Righting Wrongs” to articulate how the epistemic assumptions of differing educational contexts are affected by global privilege through the concept of *epistemic discontinuity*. Within the context of north-south global dynamics, Spivak uses figures that allow her to mark the production of unintelligibility through cultural exchanges that favor capitalist-western domination. I suggest that a figure, as she discusses it, is not a specific case or an individual person, but a concept-metaphor that can help present a frame for ethical engagement that displaces the tendency to appropriate by the dominant into a new relation. In section two, “Reading ethical singularity,” I engage with her critique of academic disciplinarity from *Death of a Discipline*, in which she argues that social sciences and humanities should supplement each other in terms of methods for knowledge-production. I engage her idea of *teleopoietic reading*, a habit of mind achieved through attention to specificity, which is a category she assigns to texts and at times to persons, but not to figures. Specificity can resist the tendency to force texts and people to represent their culture, and move instead into ethics that engages the imagination. Such an ethics, ethics as the experience of the impossible, is less interested in knowledge production than in giving oneself over to being reimagined in a relation with another. In section three, “An uncoercive rearrangement of desires,” I explore Spivak’s pedagogic ideal and suggest that it is an affect-attentive way to displace a self-satisfied and toothless global northern

benevolence with an ethical relation that could work toward social justice. Spivak uses the concept-metaphor *planetaryity* to introduce a ground for thinking more ethical global relationality, as it can help displace the dominance of a rights-based culture into a supplementary relation with responsibility-based cultures. *Planetaryity* names an ethical motivation for taking up the project of learning to learn from below, one that she hopes will move us from thinking the globe of globalization to thinking the planet as radical alterity, and ourselves as planetary subjects. Such thinking cannot state definitively that it will produce a just world, or put forward a program for social justice, but offers a reason to expose oneself to a new relation that requires an affective rethinking of one's sense of self and place in the world.

#### Section one: figures of epistemic discontinuities

In this section I describe the role of *epistemic discontinuity* in Spivak's thinking, primarily as it is treated in the essay "Righting Wrongs." The argument of "Righting Wrongs" was first delivered as a speech at Oxford University in an Amnesty International lecture series, "Human Rights and Human Wrongs." Spivak's goal was to present a critique of "human rights culture," to offer some thoughts as to how education can help to dismantle the tendency of human rights work to function according to the dictates of global north cultural logics and yet ostensibly serve global south peoples. She summarizes the general concern of her argument when she reflects,

I have been suggesting, then, that "human rights culture" runs on unrelenting Northern-ideological pressure, even when it is from the

south; that there is a real epistemic discontinuity between the Southern human rights advocates and those whom they protect. In order to shift this layered discontinuity, however slightly, we must focus on the quality and end of education, at both ends. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 284)

The title of her essay thus refers to a global dynamic she is trying to unpack: the political and economic relationship between those who “always right” and those who are “perennially wronged” (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 527).<sup>4</sup> This is her way of introducing the impact of the epistemic discontinuities that precede any interaction between globally privileged and globally disadvantaged subjects. She points out that questions of epistemology, of knowledge production, should be central to thinking the possibilities of cross-cultural interactions across cultural gaps.<sup>5</sup> These disconnects are

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<sup>4</sup> Many activist-theorists have produced work that exposes how what Spivak calls epistemes affect the possibility of social justice movements to flourish. See for instance Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Toronto: Publishers Group Canada, 2003), Priya Kandaswamy, “Innocent Victims and Brave New Laws: State Protectionism and the Battered Women’s Movement,” *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* ed. Matt Bernstein Sycamore (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006). Paula X. Rojas, “Are the Cops in Our Heads and Hearts?,” *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), Dylan Rodríguez, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), Andrea Smith, “Introduction: The Revolution Will Not Be Funded,” *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), Dean Spade, “Resisting Medicine, Re/Modeling Gender,” *Berkeley Women’s Law Journal* 18.15 (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For theoretical work that also addresses the connection between social identity and epistemology see Linda Martín Alcoff, “On Judging Epistemic Credibility: Is Social Identity Relevant?,” *Engendering Rationalities*, eds. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” *Feminist Genealogies*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Sarah Lucia Hoagland, “Denying Relationality: Epistemology and Ethics and Ignorance,” *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007),

not power-neutral, and are conditioned by economics and politics as well as language and tradition; they mark the discrepancies between culturally sanctioned ways of making meaning, common approaches to speaking, recognizing the truth and structuring arguments. To address what she sees as the epistemic particularities of these two cultural approaches to meaning-making, Spivak refers to two ends, two sides, above and below, the global South and the global North. These juxtapositions gesture to the two epistemic spheres she is concerned with bridging in the piece. "Above and below," or "North and South" are not so much geographic markers in this analysis as epistemic ones. Spivak asserts that what she names "Northern-ideological pressure" can come just as readily from those native to former colonial contexts as from the West. As I discussed in the introductory section above, this is one reason why Spivak thinks of *post*-colonialism as *neo*-colonialism.

Spivak draws heavily on her own experiences as an educator, on the one hand as a professor at Columbia in New York, and on the other hand working as a teacher and a teacher trainer with rural communities in India. The attention she pays to her experiences in these contexts is meant to link a cultural episteme to a generalizable approach to situating oneself ethically, socially, and politically with regard to modes of living with others, to strategies of survival and flourishing, and to the somewhat imagined, somewhat material relationship between oneself and political forces. In this analysis Spivak draws on large glosses for heterogenous populations. On my reading,

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Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity," Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander (New York: Routledge, 1997), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).



this should not then be taken as an assertion that either the global North or the global South can be characterized or summed up according to only one logic, but is an attempt to condense a dominant logic into a *figure* or a *concept-metaphor* that can be interrogated. Unpacking an epistemic assumption requires expressly engaging with the ways that unintelligibility is produced through cultural exchange. This is often marked by Spivak in trying to imagine what escapes or drops out of an attempt to think about the significance of global dynamics from some particular vantage point. Encapsulated in a figure such as the subaltern or the Native Informant, or a concept metaphor such as human rights, is a power dynamic that can function coercively if left unspoken and unchecked. Identifying these tropes so they can be thought-through engenders a place from which critique of the differential distribution of power across cultural epistemes can be waged. This has been an of Spivak's at least since the publication of her widely read "Can the Subaltern Speak?" That essay is organized around a concern for how representation is affected by a global capitalist economy, and makes at least two important interventions into the interrelation of subjectivity, epistemology, and power: first, in Spivak's reading of the ways the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri and the practice of Sati were represented by various parties, none of which reflected a concern with the "consciousness of the subaltern woman;" second, in her reading of how the self-proclaimed radical Western intellectuals' active disavow of their own complicity in hegemony recodifies the model of universal subjectivity they ostensibly work against" (Spivak "Subaltern Speak" 295, 74). Similarly, her treatment of the figure of the native informant in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* argues that an opaque ambivalency is drawn on when Western academic disciplines invoke figures of global South cultures. Traditionally, in anthropology or ethnography the term *native informant* had described a

human subject of a study who provides ‘insider’ information for the scientist to use in generating theories about the indigenous culture being studied. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak rethinks the position of the native informant as not one who provides information, but who is “...blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe” (Spivak *Critique* 6). For such a western imaginary, the native informant is not an ethical *other* so much as a reflective surface that can be made to represent an idea projected by the agent of a dominant culture. The figure in the position of the native informant is not seen to be psychically complex in a way that would warrant any extra work or undue attention. This native informant is not unlike the person of color sidekick in a Hollywood romantic comedy or television sitcom: her back story is so familiar because of dominant cultural scripts that it can be recollected by a few choice gestures or phrases, but it is incidental to the plot anyway, which is focused on the (usually romantic) destiny of the white protagonist. Spivak uses this idea of the native informant to structure a critical argument about the status of Western canonic thinking by tracking its appearance in two separate contexts. According to Spivak’s reading of Kant, Hegel and Marx, within the context of the “great texts” of Western disciplinary humanities, the position of the native informant is an “unacknowledgable moment,” “crucially needed” yet “foreclosed” (Spivak *Critique* 4). On her reading, what these philosophers have in common is that in the course of making now-canonical philosophical arguments about freedom, they appeal to the native informant as an example of a kind of negative or failed position that has demonstrative, argumentative validity. However, the disruptive potential of “the poorest *woman* of the South” appearing as a native informant that could contest the universalizing hegemony in much of Western philosophical texts is structurally

precluded. She writes, “I think of the ‘native informant’ as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation” (Spivak *Critique* 5-6). In that sense, the idea that the native informant *could* appear is invoked as a kind of promise; the promise that universal Western culture will spread, that eventually all people will be included in a world history, or an enlightened cosmopolitanism, or an egalitarian communist order (Spivak *Critique* 6). Yet this promise is disingenuous, for in the act of projecting a cultural identity onto the Third-World other, the possibility of an actual engagement is obviated. The perpetual sidekick does not get to tell her own story.

Another context for Spivak’s reading of the native informant is tentatively identified as the current conditions of practicing disciplinary humanities within Global North academic institutions, institutions that are in many ways the legacy of those ‘Great Thinkers’ of the ‘Western Tradition.’ There, or here, perhaps, the Native Informant is a similarly ambivalent position, but for different reasons. Spivak argues that something like “hybrid global culture” and the idea of the postcolonial subject function analogously: both are in danger of taking the place in academic imaginations that had been held by the Native Informant. To display the transition into a particular phase of Postcoloniality on a global scale, she argues that the Native Informant’s role is being usurped and occupied by a certain kind of postcolonial subject, one who Spivak argues is less *post*-colonial than a recoded colonial subject. She notes, “Increasingly, there is the self-marginalizing or self-consolidating migrant or postcolonial masquerading as a ‘native informant’” (Spivak *Critique* 6). This native informant speaks in the name of indigenous knowledge, culture, etc. but is a postcolonial migrant who lives in an urban environment, and who is quite often the direct descendent and primary

beneficiary of colonial intervention in the Global South. In each case, the Native Informant, as Postcolonial subject or as hybrid global culture, *looks like* the projected desire of a dominant, mainstream desire, while *feeling like* a comforting and supportive “difference.” The result is that cultural difference becomes superficial; this “native” situated herself *as* native other within a western, urban space where she retains a fluency or a mastery, and so is “self-marginalizing.” She is “self-consolidating” in as much as she formulates her own subject position along a model of western-style agency and sovereignty. The position of the native informant is simultaneously pointed to as clearly delineated and transparent, *while* invoked as “hybrid” or multiplicitous.<sup>6</sup> By way of this ambivalent structure, it thus becomes more of a placeholder for a desire of global north culture than a forceful and disruptive ethical *other*. Even if it were a good idea, this person is not situated so that she could represent with any integrity the needs of the global poor.<sup>7</sup> Further, as an assimilated position it is unclear what force she has retained for herself to speak against dominant trends at all.<sup>8</sup> This position then remains

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<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha had argued for a notion of cultural hybridity “that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994). Spivak seems to suggest here that hybridity easily functions as an alibi. The movement of at least some former colonial or post-colonial subjects from margin to center has been accomplished, but this has not forced a disruption of the exclusionary dominance of the mainstream.

<sup>7</sup> This resonates with the critique of bourgeois intellectuals in Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, eds. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998). See also Linda Martín Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood, eds. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Here I am thinking the history of assimilation in the U.S. as marking an inherently conservative approach to multiculturalism that dates to at least the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and advocates for immigrants that the adoption of a pre-established and transparent U.S. identity is the only patriotic option. On this model, ethnic and/or racial identities are conceptualized as barriers that need to be overcome in the project of becoming American. Linda Martín Alcoff, Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self,

neutralized, unable to open up the space of an ethical engagement that could confront the ways that culture, politics, and economics prefigure how subjects can appear in certain spaces in the global landscape. This is why Spivak sets the position of the native informant in tension with “the poorest woman of the global South”—not so such a woman could become the new figure of absolute and irrecoverable difference, but so the ethical relation that is not taking place can be marked as excluded.

Spivak clearly articulates the elision of cultural difference in north-south interactions. What needs to be discussed are better ways to better move between dominant and non-dominant logics. In order to develop this further, I turn briefly to her analysis of human rights from “Righting Wrongs” as an example of a concept that bears the legacy of the epistemic discontinuities between the global north and global south. Spivak’s critical assessment of this idea helps to make more clear the political stakes of these power-infused cultural differences. There are two kinds of diagnosis that Spivak brings to the idea of human rights: human rights as *alibi* and human rights as *enabling violation*. Regarding human rights as alibi she writes, “[t]he idea of human rights...may carry within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism—the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit” (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 524). The idea of the alibi is one that Spivak employs often to indicate when an idea or concept appears to be doing some good, for example human rights (what could be better?), but this “goodness” actually obscures a power dynamic and protects that dynamic’s beneficiaries. Spivak invokes the idea of the alibi when she wants to name a psychological disposition toward an ideological power dynamic. The

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Studies in Feminist Philosophy, ed. Chesire Calhoun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 20-1.

functioning of this alibi can be unconscious or conscious or some combination of the two. Her historical example of this is the mantle of the “white man’s burden” under which the British Empire ‘civilized and developed’ its colonies, functioning as an alibi for “economic, military and political intervention” (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 524). On this model, cultural relativism can be an alibi for what is actually cultural chauvinism, serving as a superficially moral reason to remake the world in the image of Western norms.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, human rights can function as an alibi when the interventions made in its name, for example aid projects, perpetuate rather than ameliorate the economic dependence of the South. Spivak thus aligns human rights with a kind of disaster politics, in which “democratization” becomes a code word for turning a third-world nation into a “tributary economy” for the West (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 543). In such an instance, the human rights intervention works as an *alibi* for the perpetuation of the economic superiority of the North.

On the other hand, human rights can also function as an *enabling violation*. In order to articulate this, Spivak has to work through the concern that rights discourse as such, particularly the 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of human rights that permeates the globe, has an inherent Eurocentric bias. Regarding this, she writes, “I am of course troubled by the use of human rights as an alibi for interventions of various sorts. But its so-called European provenance is for me in the same category as the ‘enabling violation’ of the production of the colonial subject. One cannot write off the righting of wrongs. The

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<sup>9</sup> This power dynamic is at stake in Spivak’s critique that colonialism entails “White men are saving brown women from brown men” Spivak, "Subaltern Speak," 296. The assertion of such an alibi remains a global tactic; Puar and Rai, for instance, argue that professed care for the female “victims” of the Taliban served both to garner justification for the U.S. war in Iraq and as a prop for uncritical Western liberal feminists to set themselves up as saviors; see Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20.3 (2002): 127-30.

enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated” (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 524). For Spivak, an *enabling violation* engenders possibilities and kinds of agencies *while* it simultaneously overwrites other kinds of agency and perpetrates injustices or oppressions. It is not a pure or unproblematic concept, but it is a productive one. It tries to encompass the certainty that there may be a wrong that needs righting, and this does not mean that the process of righting that wrong should not remain accountable for the changes it tries to enact and for the possible violence of its own methods. Using the historical example of the production of the colonial subject exposes the difficulties and the stakes of Spivak’s attempt to resituate human rights as an enabling violation. She argues, “Colonialism was committed to the education of a certain class. It was interested in the seemingly permanent operation of an altered normality,” one which intends a “self-empowerment” that Spivak sees as “paradoxically” lacking in much of the work in contemporary human rights and development, be it undertaken by Northern activists or Southern middle class descendants of the old colonial subjects (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 524). Spivak sees in colonialism’s admittedly self-interested dedication to the education of a class in colonial India a commitment in terms of time, effort and patience as well as an ostensible interest in agency that is lacking in much contemporary aid work. For an example of a kind of insufficient aid work, she cites Doctors without Borders. This is not to be unsympathetic toward the people who dedicate themselves to such work; it is underfunded and under-appreciated, and as Spivak notes, it would not do to “write off” attempts to right wrongs. However, Doctors without Borders is on her analysis an organization that delivers crisis healthcare while their physicians can not provide primary health care: they do not advise patients over time on sustaining their health, do

not have the time to learn the languages and customs of the patients being served, and thus do not commit to the “seemingly permanent operation of an altered normality” in the places they work. At stake is a “short-term commitment to righting wrongs versus long-term involvement to learn from below the persistent undoing of the reproduction of class apartheid and its attendant evils” (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 568). These doctors can heal wounds that urgently need attention, but they are not working towards building a healthy community, understood in a more robust sense. On this view, human rights could function as enabling violations to the extent that aid work participates in an alteration of the social world that seeks what the West might name self-empowerment on the part of the community being served by aid work.

I have suggested here that there is a concern held in common in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, and “Righting Wrongs.” This concern seeks to mark, through a figure or a concept, the non-occurrence of an engagement with a different cultural episteme in terms of its logics, meanings, values. This requires not only analyses which are situated in the larger context of global resource distribution and a historicized account of the sedimentation of cultural differences, but also a specific notion of ethical experience, which I treat below. I will go on to suggest that for Spivak, a relation of global dominance could shift into one of ethical engagement only on the condition of the dominant cultural subject’s allowing themselves to be rewritten in the process of an ethical exchange. The engagement with ethics I address below does not offer proscriptions for good behavior or proper ethical principles. Rather, on this analysis, “To attend to the unleashing of the ethical gives no guarantee that it will produce a “good” result—just that it will bring in a relation,



perhaps" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 573). I address how to understand bringing about a new relation as an ethical task in the following sections.

## Section two: reading ethical singularity

In the preface of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak cautions against presenting "the ethics of alterity as a politics of identity" (Spivak *Critique* x). The politics of identity with which she is concerned with would flatten out heterogeneity in the service of collecting data, reinscribing the dominance of the global North. It would serve as an alibi for the urban postcolonial migrant to speak in the name of "The Third World," without irony or scare quotes. An ethics of alterity, on the other hand, would not jettison identity as a concern, and certainly not as a political concern, if identity is understood as social location. But such an ethics would never presume that the representation of another in her identity is anything but a reductive representation, a flat bit of knowledge that does not sufficiently account for the ethical experience of interacting with another. For Spivak, such an encounter is a singular experience, one that should continually bear on any generalized political claim. In section three below, I will have more to say about the concept of alterity as it relates to planetarity. Here, I want to think through the relation between politics and ethics in terms of Spivak's account of ethics as an "experience of the impossible." For Spivak, ethics must always begin with the specific, and her model is one of a relation between two people. However, it is by beginning with such specificity that the relationship between the generalizable and the singular is opened up in her work. She expresses this through the concept-metaphor *teleopoiesis*, a mode of reading a text that expresses calls for

simultaneous attention to the singular and the general. That is, Spivak's account of singularity has both a textual and an experiential component. It is on this model of singularity that an ethical concern can be made to supplement a more generalizable claim in the service of something like justice.<sup>10</sup>

I begin approaching Spivak's idea of ethical singularity through her critique of institutional academic life. *Death of a Discipline* opens with an attempt to intervene in the anxious internal policing of comparative literature's disciplinary boundaries. Rather than be concerned with maintaining a narrow sense of the 'proper' work of comparative

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<sup>10</sup> As I have mentioned, Spivak situates herself with regard to the history of colonialism by maintaining that she has an ambivalent view toward the creation of "access to the European enlightenment through colonization." As she goes on to note, "...this is one of the reasons why I hang in with Derrida, because here is one critic of ethnocentrism who continues, as I remarked in "Responsibility," to indicate the danger and bad faith in a wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment" Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103.2/3 (2004): 565. She says it is a deconstructive idea that one must negotiate a structure at the same time that one is dismantling and recreating it, that one inhabits the space one is problematizing. She notes, "[w]e would rather not construct the best possible theory, but acknowledge that practice always splits open the theoretical justification" (Spivak 531). Spivak has clearly been influenced by Derrida's way of relating ethics to praxis; ethics as the experience of the impossible and ethics of alterity are both also Derridean ideas. She also uses logic of the future interior as it is found in the work of Derrida, "where one promises no future present but attends upon what will have happened as a result of one's work" Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 198-99. For this reason, concrete qualifications of this idea of justice are rare in Spivak's work. However, if justice is unqualified, there is nonetheless great attention to specificity and context in Spivak's work, and she distinguishes her own approach from Derrida's by suggesting her analysis can think the specificity of classed and raced determination across genders in a way that his does not, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 308. She maintains that the deconstructive stance is "[p]ersistently to critique [the] structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit," Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 31. However, I find that Spivak's deconstructive-yet-not critique is better able than Derrida's to deploy its tools in the service of global justice, especially in terms of the specificities of global capital and with regard to social identity. For a more extensive treatments of Derrida's influence on Spivak, see Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Malden: Polity, 2007) esp. 70-95.

literature in terms of its canon or methods, Spivak argues that comparative literature should “collaborate with and transform area studies,” another academic discipline, to the expansion and benefit of both (Spivak *Death* 19). On her view, area studies and other social sciences should supplement comparative literature, and vice versa—not simply by critiquing each other’s “results,” but at a deeper level, engaging with the methodology of knowledge production that is the institutional standard for each discipline.

According to Spivak’s diagnosis, area studies requires “the skill of reading closely in the original” and linguistic sophistication that Comparative Literature excels at, while Comparative Literature needs training in the self-conscious politicization and empirical engagement with the Global South that is common to Area Studies (Spivak *Death* 6, 9). Her vision for the methodology of such an intra-disciplinary engagement calls for “...learning the protocol of those disciplines, turning them around, laboriously, not only by building institutional bridges but also by persistent curricular interventions. The most difficult thing here is to resist mere appropriation of the dominant” (Spivak *Death* 11). I see a similar movement in this call for supplementarity as was in the discussion of north-south global politics I discussed above. In each case, what is required is an active critique of the ways that borders come to be sedimented in order to give way for a new relation. In Spivak’s body of work, new relations are the domain of ethics. Thus, for discrete academic disciplines to ‘turn each other around,’ to engage more effectively with the global south, an ethical analysis is required. It would be necessary not just for scholars to dialogue with each other around our work. We would have to go further, opening up to each other to hear input on the texts and methods that constitute our respective canons, arranging that reception in such a way that the tensions between disciplines can be marshaled against appropriation, which would only reconfirm the

value of what we already do, and toward more creative changes in the standards that govern our disciplines.

This concern with institutionalized disciplinarity informs the method of this project too inasmuch as I write for an academic audience within a disciplinary space that is confronting its own margins and its own moves to self-consolidation and protectionism. Be it continental vs. analytic philosophers, philosophers vs. interdisciplinary interlopers, or academics vs. activists, I have witnessed how the production of a discipline's borders holds sway over what kinds of critiques can be recognized as legitimately philosophical. Thus Spivak's lesson, that the disciplinary space within which an idea of the ethical is produced must be subject to critique, and that such a critique can work in the name of something like justice, is one that this project takes to heart. Further, Spivak's considerations of disciplinarity bear on my current considerations of ethical, political, social critique not because the Western academic institutions are the paradigms or ideals of Western ethical perspectives, but because the academic institution can be understood as one Western institution among others, and as such, an illuminating space *for* ethical, political, social concern.

Thus I am compelled to think further with Spivak around the stakes of her proposed interdisciplinary work as an example of how she uses her idea of ethical singularity to work toward justice. As an example of the kind of institutional, disciplinary engagement Spivak calls for, in the "Afterword" of *Imaginary Maps*, she reflects on her reading of Mahasweta Devi's fiction and also foreshadows the central concerns of *Death of a Discipline*, stating,

I have, perhaps foolishly, attempted to open the structure of an impossible social justice glimpsed through remote and secret encounters with singular figures; to bear witness to the specificity of language, theme, and history as well as to supplement hegemonic notions of a hybrid global culture with this experience of an impossible global justice. (Spivak "Afterword" 197)

Spivak suggests here that ethical, political, social critique can be motivated by a complicated and indeterminate notion of justice, understood as an incomplete or unfinished desire. Such a perhaps-impossible justice needs to be set in active relation to any concepts used to account for contemporary subjects. Hybridity is such a concept, yet previously mentioned, this concept can presume to represent “everyone’s” kind of subjectivity, and thus cover over, rather than expose, lived differences between subjects. In order to disrupt the easy slide of a relation between two into a dominance by the more powerful, Spivak argues that politics must be supplemented by ethics, and for Spivak, specificity is the means of this supplementation. This sustained and careful commitment to think specificity is a “habit of mind” that inculcates disruptive, critical engagements that can orient a thinker toward “impossible justice.” This brief statement evokes the methodology of the “Collectivities” and “Planetarities” sections of *Death of a Discipline*.<sup>11</sup> There, Spivak turns to close reading of literature, theoretical texts and popular political writings in order to develop a technique of accounting for singularity that opens up onto a general field, as opposed to trying to develop a universal account that can also be deployed to illuminate a specific case. This deployment of ethical specificity is linked in her thought with global and social justice. For instance, her goal in the second chapter of *Death of a Discipline* is to investigate what the close reading of

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<sup>11</sup> Similar arguments are made in both “Righting Wrongs” and *Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet*, which is why I treat them together.

literature can provide for the “formation of collectivities,” an attempt to think on an inclusive level that must be labeled the “general” without capitulating to a logic of difference that appropriates, rather than engages with, the non-dominant (Spivak *Death* 26). Spivak’s consideration of the academic scenes that produce knowledge is part of larger ethical, political, social trends. She calls for supplementary interdisciplinary work that could get closer to the singularity expressed in texts, arguing that comparative literature should recognize that “the proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative” (Spivak *Death* 13). In this way, trans-cultural literature could grant the reader a sense, a mediated experience, of the active lives of cultural others—a first glimpse, perhaps, of the mindsets I addressed above. As she goes on to note, when picking up a work of literature produced from within a culture that is not one’s own, one is outside of the cultural context of that narrative. Nonetheless, for Spivak there is an ethical call from the work, a call for the reader to resist adopting a reductive objectifying stance, in which another—be it a character, or the authorial voice of an essay, or the bearer of a statistic—becomes a representation of culture.

An objectifying gaze that looks only for flat representations of lived lives is juxtaposed in this analysis to that of a “reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself” (Spivak *Death* 13). Spivak elaborates,

This is preparation for a patient and provisional and forever deferred arrival into the performative of the other, in order not to transcode but to draw a response. Believe me, there is a world of difference between the two positions. In order to reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination—the great inbuilt instrument of othering—we may, if we work as hard as old-fashioned Comp. Lit. is known to be capable of doing, come close to the irreducible work of translation, not

from language to language but from bodily to ethical semiosis, the incessant shuffle that is a “life.” (Spivak *Death* 13)

By invoking semiosis, the process of generating signs, she highlights the activity of meaning-making that attends such an inter-cultural engagement. The transcoding of a cultural representation is aligned with a representational way of relating to a text, one that shares the problem of the figure of the native informant I discussed earlier. It invokes a reductive and stagnant identity of another, one easily interpreted in terms of a pre-established hermeneutic. Resisting the search for identity claims about another’s culture in favor of experiencing the way another is presented as one aspect of the performance of a multifaceted culture, captured in a textual moment that does not stand for a larger claim “about” that different life, requires activity of quite a different nature. The activity of reading for which Spivak argues requires concurrent work on the self while engaged with another or with a text. It also entails the participation of one’s imagination. Spivak elucidates what this work of the imagination would involve when she distinguishes between “learning *about* cultures” and the work of “imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps. Teleopoiesis” (Spivak *Death* 52). If poesis is an “imaginative making” (Spivak *Imperatives* 76), then teleopoiesis is an imaginative making across distances, but not one in which I try to grasp the *meaning of* the distant text. Instead, it is one in which I try to frame the textual encounter as an ethical encounter between myself and a distant other in which I am also called, to use Judith Butler’s phrase, to give an account of myself.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> see GA; also butler chapter above

To further clarify the claim that “ethics is the experience of the impossible,” I turn now to how Spivak connects this account of reading the singular through one-on-one engagement with another to social and political concerns (Spivak “Translator's Preface” xxv). This is crucial for how she is able to take an intimate structure and make it relevant for considering the stakes of institutional and global issues of justice. Spivak addresses ethical singularity quite directly in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. She is concerned with the possibility of movements that work toward “an ecologically just world,” and wants to consider what supplements are needed to keep collective efforts from reproducing the power relations they fight against (Spivak *Critique* 382). To this end, she writes,

We all know that when we engage profoundly with *one* person, the responses—the answers—come from both sides. Let us call this responsibility, as well as “answer”ability or accountability. We also know, and if we don’t we have been unfortunate, that in such engagements, we want to reveal and reveal and conceal nothing. Yet on both sides, there is always a sense that something has not got across. This is what we call the secret, not something that one wants to conceal, but something that one wants desperately to reveal in this relationship of singularity and responsibility and accountability. (It would be more philosophical to say that “secret” is the name lent to the fact or possibility that everything does not go across. Never mind.) In this sense, ethical singularity can be called a secret encounter. (Please note that I am not talking about meeting in secret.) Ethical singularity is approached when responses flow from both sides. Otherwise, the idea, that if the person I am doing good to resembles me and has my rights, he or she will be better off, does not begin to disclose-efface the (im)possible ethical relation. (Nor of course does an attitude of unqualified admiration for the person as an example of his or her culture.)<sup>13</sup> (Spivak *Critique* 384)

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<sup>13</sup> A version of this same passage appears earlier in the “Translator’s Preface” to *Imaginary Maps*.



Here, Spivak invites the reader to reflect on her experiences of intimate exchanges with another. She takes the rhetorical tactic of gesturing to an experience “we all know.” Since the question of human experience, of the meaning and nature of being human, is continually being reopened in her work, I trust that she is not trying to name a universal experience so much as open a space that can be filled in by the experiences that come to mind. For example, when I read this passage my thoughts go to times when I have met a new friend. Perhaps it happens in an unexpected place—a meeting that was otherwise dull, a party one was obligated to attend. Something shifts, and another pops out of the backdrop as someone I want to know well, not just be familiar with. I am curious about her family, background, home. What she likes to eat, her take on the TV and books I like. All of a sudden I do not want to animate my public, polite, socializing self, I want to animate a more personal version of myself for this other person, to have them see my sense of humor, my politics, my tastes.<sup>14</sup> We are in what Spivak calls a space of responding, of ‘answerability,’ when caught up in a kind of feedback loop of discourse that nourishes itself. When one of us speaks, the other feels energized, and wants to reply. This new friend is now someone I am invested in; I feel bound to their experiences in some way. This can be a joyful connection and it can be painful, but either way, it is *vibrant*. For some, this intimacy might take the shape of discussing their erotic lives, or their experiences with oppressions. For others, those topics are uninteresting, but they might care deeply about how to understand sacred texts. Or to recall how important sports were to their childhoods. To speak of the

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<sup>14</sup> I take the language of animate from María Lugones, María Lugones, “Playfulness, “World”-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2.2 (1987). Lugones’ idea of the self suggests that although a person always experiences herself in the first person, she does not experience an underlying, true self. Rather, various external and internal conditions allow one to *animate* different selves as one travels through worlds.

environments in which they are most at home. Or to share how the loss of a child has changed their life. Whatever the particulars, Spivak suggests that what is unique about this space is that in wanting to connect we also want to understand and be understood, while we also know that this is impossible in any unconditioned sense. I do not so much require that the other share my experiences, as I want to think and feel my experiences anew through this engagement, and to come to understand theirs. However, it is in really trying to understand that the limits of understanding reveal themselves most forcefully. No matter what it is about this person that drew me to them, whatever our connection, we are not the same. Each of our histories, contexts, personal reflections, fears, and hopes are discrete from each other's, and there is no possibility for true transparency, for one-to-one translation from my life into the mind of another. The desire is there, to express one's own perspective, to grasp the perspective of another, yet it is always somewhat frustrated.

Spivak's model for conceiving of ethical singularity is thus an engagement between two people, a dynamic interaction of sharing and becoming familiar that *regrets* what one can never know or understand about the other. Spivak suggests this comportment can undermine, at least for a time, tropes of dominance. When that other person is allowed to "represent" something, to be a particular instance of 'a person like that'—a person in a wheelchair, a person of color, a Liberal person—the disingenuous impression that there is no more to the story precludes ethical interrelation and the production of ethical social theory. Training in reading, however, invokes the general from the position of the singular in the mode of an ethical teleopoiesis whose comportment is akin to the ethical engagement I describe above. Singularity on this analysis breaks the tendency toward universalization that is something of a hallmark of

theories that come out of Western traditions. As she notes in “Righting Wrongs,” “...although I generalize, my example remains the singular. On the practical calculus, the problem of the singular and the universal is confronted by learning from the singularity of the singular, a way to the imagination of the public sphere, that rational representation of the universal” (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 542). What is at stake then is a way to reimagine the terrain of public discourse such that ethical singularity weighs on any demand for universal justice. For example, Spivak discusses this in her engagement with trans national feminisms on *Death of a Discipline*. There she offers a reading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* to demonstrate her concerns about universalization and the possibility of an unstable general account orienting a more ethical global critique. In order for a feminist project to not superimpose a pre-established idea of “woman” as the subject of feminism, the question of in the name of whom feminism works must be continually posed as a question. The generalizable, not the universal, captures the movement of “...poiesis trembling into the task of teleopoiesis,” an active making of meaning that turns back onto the self as part of an ethical engagement (Spivak *Death* 43). As she notes, “The generality of poiesis depends on its unverifiability; it cannot be tied to a singular ‘fact.’ There is another kind of generality, which must suppress singularity in order to establish a ‘fact.’ It is, if you like, the difference between prefiguration and prediction” (Spivak *Death* 44). As I have argued here, ‘the secret’ of ethical encounters has to have a broad ethical, political, social frame in order to be relevant for ‘justice.’ The ethical relation in which one gives in to a teleopoietic reading with another requires a person affectively invested in remaking herself along with the other. As I discuss further in section three below, Spivak rethinks the possibility of general thinking under the moniker of planetarity as a way to push

beyond the bounds of a traditional universal-particular debate. Teleopoietic readings should not engage singularity as a particular instantiation of a universal idea, but instead, frame an engagement with singularity such that “ethical semiosis” disrupts universalization. On her analysis, this should be a strategy for activists and disciplinary academics alike. It would bring the surprise, openness, and continued self-critique of ethical encounters into the contexts in which statistical information is compiled and policy decisions are made, which requires thinking generalizable, not universal, concerns. Planetarity is the name given to a different frame for questions of justice, one that is not supported by verifiable fact, but instead orients an imagination open to the possibility of thinking justice outside of a monocultural context.

### Section three: an uncoercive rearrangement of desires

For Spivak ethics is marked as a recurring commitment to know the other better. That ethics is ‘the experience of the impossible’ implies a relation that is not simply ethical, but also has a social and political valence: ethical, as it requires change on ‘both sides’ of the relation; social, as it entails engagement with different epistemes and different ideas of the ‘everyday;’ and political, as these relations are always influenced by national and international law and economies. Because of this, Spivak calls on global thinkers to consider how political struggle and the impossibility of ethical singularity can supplement each other. In this section, I develop this account of ethical singularity by drawing in Spivak’s idea of planetarity, which is a key tactic of how she connects ethical singularity and global politics. I open up this discussion by way of Spivak’s claim in

“Righting Wrongs” that education ideally would be an uncoercive rearrangement of desires. She engages the educational contexts of both the global south and global north, tracking on the one hand the usual pedagogies that attend a culture of rights in the north and western-inspired south, and on the other, the usual pedagogies that attend a culture of responsibility. At issue here is to identify how the affects of benevolence prop-up the discontinuities between the well-meaning privileged and the imagined beneficiaries of their charity. Understanding how such affects are reinforced through education helps develop affect-attentive critique that can work to displace benevolence in favor of an ethical relation that is more disruptive of the dominance of the global north. Planetaryity is the grounds upon which one would change one’s customary ethical relation. Focusing primarily on her analysis in *Imperatives to Reimagine the Planet*, I show here that *planetaryity* marks a call to engage the imagination in rethinking the planet to resist the tendency of globalization. I argue here that an affectively attuned reading helps better stage an engagement between such differing pedagogical epistemes. I suggest that displacing benevolence into an ethics rooted in planetary alterity calls for a guided affective shift that does not ground ethical imperatives in reason, but instead opens up a context that would decenter the customary grounds for ethics.

As I addressed in section one above, Spivak discusses two global epistemes in “Righting Wrongs,” each of which addresses the possible role of humanities-style education in serving social justice. One context is the western-style educational institutions that train relatively privileged students in a, the other the educational institutions that serve the global poor in rural areas (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 527).

The first part<sup>15</sup> of this essay takes the form of sketching the possibilities of supplementing American/European style higher education in the metropolitan global north so that it can support “global social justice,” specifically in terms of working to redress what she calls “world-wide class apartheid” by working against easily available idioms for representing current global dynamics (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 526, 29). The second part asks after which pedagogical practices will best help supplement the education of children in “rural poor” subaltern<sup>16</sup> communities in the global South such that they can become enfranchised as democratic citizens. Both of these educational questions are asked in the context of a world that is globalizing under capitalist imperatives. Her interest is to explicitly thematize the epistemic assumptions that subtend different kinds of education and to understand these educational projects as participating in a common global dynamic. To contribute to this, she thinks through the training she has received in humanities research, her pedagogical experience at ‘both ends,’ and her political work to consider how these practices can work to serve global justice, with justice understood along the deconstructive model of an always-deferred justice to-come.

The pedagogical projects aligned with the global epistemes I discussed above would each strive for the ideal end of Humanities education for Spivak, the institution in the student of “an *uncoercive* rearrangement of desires” (Spivak “Righting Wrongs” 526). That is, education in its most ideal form would provide the grounds for mind-changing,

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<sup>15</sup> I say part one because this essay does not adhere to a clear overarching structure or organizational model. However, Spivak mentions a second part once the reader is a bit into the “first part” so there is a somewhat back-formed “first part.”

<sup>16</sup> The question of the subaltern is of course posed in Spivak’s early work; in this essay, Spivak gives the term a clear economic determination, calling subaltern “those removed from lines of social mobility” (RW 531). On this analysis, the subaltern episteme is one whose deficiency for capitalism is asserted and actively enforced.

but not dictate mind-changing.<sup>17</sup> It would not simply be an education into an academic tradition, but an invitation to engage with a different episteme that opens up the possibility of informed ethical relations that are also affective relations. For instance, Spivak's critique of U.S.-style University education highlights the way that politicized affects are inculcated and nurtured under an educational paradigm that uses human rights as an alibi. Universities, then, are a useful context for understanding the stakes of the global north as a rights-based culture. To better situate the 'above' pedagogical scene in a context that can confront global economic and political disparities with less perpetuation of northern dominance, Spivak argues that metropolitan educators work with students toward resisting a kind of self-defensive privilege, which might take the form of "...a suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happened, and that New York is necessarily the capital of the world" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 532). I want to highlight the emotional comportment that is invoked in such a statement, and how it might connect to a general cultural orientation toward global politics which can be at least partly understood as *benevolence*. For instance, Spivak critiques the way that global justice is at times invoked in U.S. universities, insisting that "...the problem with U.S. education is that it teaches (corporatist) benevolence while trivializing the teaching of the Humanities. The result is, at best, cultural relativism as cultural absolutism," that is, the personal narrative that

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<sup>17</sup> Spivak uses the language of mind-changing when discussing ethical singularity in the "Afterword" of *Imaginary Maps*, stating "I have no doubt that we must *learn* to learn from the original practical ecological philosophers of the world, through the slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name "love" Spivak, "Afterword," *Imaginary Maps* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 200-01..

one honors all difference under the name of tolerance (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 532).<sup>18</sup> Such benevolence can be inculcated as a civic value in schools, and it may be attended by a (smug) feeling of its *rightness* which obscures an emotional investment in a narrative that entails cultural superiority. In "Righting Wrongs," Spivak situates the tendency toward such benevolence within an analysis of how responsibility is understood within a rights-based culture. This sense of responsibility is more or less synonymous with duty, is assumed by choice, and its shape and form is directed by the will of those who are set up to be able to "right wrongs" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 535). Responsibility here is not at all unlike the 'white man's burden,' and often manifests in the conflation with one's own ability to "manage a complicated life support system" with "being civilized" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 564). Privilege is here characterized as a fluency in institutionalized living, and is another way of invoking an epistemic discontinuity, one governed perhaps by an ability to navigate bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dennis Carlson, for example, argued that tolerance is the emotional stance of a liberal approach to multiculturalism in the U.S., the goal of which is equal treatment before the law. Problematically, tolerance is only expected in public, in the context of an ideal color-blind society with a level playing field. Dennis Carlson, "Remembering Rosa: Rosa Parks, Multicultural Education, and Dominant Narratives of the Civil Rights Movement in America," Grappling with Diversity: Readings on Civil Rights Pedagogy and Critical Multiculturalism, eds. Susan Schramm-Pate and Rhonda B. Jeffries (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008) 17. As Agid and Rand have argued, the teaching of tolerance as an ideal of multicultural higher-education does not sufficiently guide students through an analysis of their relationship to structural oppressions. The result is that "...you may feel bad about it, and may therefore feel bad for those people [who experience oppressions], but you are not challenged to find out your actual relationship to that thing or those people you feel badly about" Shana Agid and Erica Rand, "Teaching Beyond 'Tolerance'," Radical Teacher.80 (2007): 3. Such a self-understanding can thus create an emotional block, when one protests that one cannot possibly have something racist, because racist people are evil while one is good, which impedes a transformative relation to social oppressions which are understood as structural.

<sup>19</sup> I suspect there is a fruitful connection here to the laws currently attempting to be passed in several states that would require picture I.D. in order to be eligible to vote. I



To set an uncoercive rearrangement of desires as a pedagogical ideal in such a context would entail establishing the affective conditions for questioning the association of modernization with progress.

With regard to subaltern pedagogies, Spivak's concern is to resist the tendency to reduce education for poor children to the "rote." Education (whatever the locale) is identified by her as part of how we develop facility for living in a culture. She calls for educators in poor rural communities to resist what she presents as a too-common schism between lower class and middle-to-upper class education: that higher education includes the ideal of understanding while lower class education focuses on skills such as spelling and memorization (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 561). She states that this schism perpetuates "...an absolute and accepted divide..." and thus names her pedagogical commitment in rural global south communities to communicate that, "it is the class apartheid of the state that is taken on in the move from rote to comprehension" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 561, 62). These pedagogical politics must articulate how to use education as a way to facilitate the better integration of rural communities into democratic cultural forms, but this must happen in a way that does not overwrite entirely the political and ethical sensibilities already being lived out, mindful of what she also calls the of the rural poor's 'mindset,' a "combination of ethics and episteme" (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 527). She argues in "Righting Wrongs" that the mindset of the rural poor is often that of responsibility-based cultures that have been coded as deficient for capitalism. The cultural episteme there relates to the idea of responsibility-to, rather than the responsible-for she understands as characteristic of the global beneficence of a rights-based culture. The claim is that, in each case, a way of existing

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do not have sufficient time to develop this point, but to think further about this see Mariah Blake, "The Ballot Cops," *The Atlantic* October 2012 (2012).

with others was assumed as ground for the founding of political sensibilities about how we should live together, but only one has become the taken-for-granted model of political intervention writ large. In response, she suggests, “[m]y method is to learn from below how to fashion, together, a way of teaching that will put in place reflexes or habits of mind for which the shortcut name is “democracy.” Since this is the largest sector of the future electorate, my belief is that without the habit of democracy, no reform will last” (Spivak "Righting Wrongs" 581). The uncoercive rearrangement of desires in this context would invite the children of the rural poor into a democratic mindset in a way that does not demand assimilation.

This is clearly not an easy position to conceive, much less implement. The scope of my project right now does not allow me sufficient time or resources to engage with the question of the democratization of the globe in any depth, or to attend properly to any practical questions concerning the implementation of education in global south contexts.<sup>20</sup> Rather, what I take from Spivak’s analysis is the way she opens up the question of what should ground ethics. She is interested in “...an imperative to reimagine the subject as planetary” (Spivak *Imperatives* 48). Spivak looks for a way to speak theoretically about an ethical motivation toward a planetary, rather than a global, subject. The globe, on this analysis, is a grid in which capitalist expansion is plotted. It is a force for homogenization at the expense of lived differences. She seeks to rethink the characteristic relation in which rights are counterposed to responsibility in order to argue for one in which they supplement each other, arguing in *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet*, “...both the dominant and the subordinate must jointly rethink themselves as

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<sup>20</sup> For one analysis of Spivak’s ethical singularity in the context of development work, see Ilan Kapoor, "Hyper-Self Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World 'Other'," *Third World Quarterly* 25.4 (2004).

intended or interpolated by planetary alterity, albeit articulating the task of thinking and doing from different ‘cultural’ angles” (Spivak *Imperatives* 78). This parallels the claim of “Righting Wrongs” that humanities-style education should work at ‘both ends.’ Alterity is introduced not as synonym for otherness but as a signifier that resists being put into a binary. The usual context for imagining such an alterity is a religious context; for Spivak, what we have to do is seek “...a re-constellated planetary imperative to responsibility, seen as a right precomprehending becoming-human, where the proper name of alterity is not God, in any language” (Spivak *Imperatives* 76). This is important, for she cites ‘deficient for capitalism’ cultures as the best model at work in the world now of such a planetarity, “an episteme or mindset that persistently undoes the conflict between right and responsibility” which is “historically a pre-capitalist mindset” (Spivak *Imperatives* 56-58). Spivak is not suggesting that there is a mindset naturally found in older cultures or aboriginal cultures that can be discovered there and asserted as a better, more original model of the human, but that “the planetary mode of intending must be urged on both sides” (Spivak *Imperatives* 52). Such a claim would problematically recreate the move of hypostasizing pre-colonial periods as pure or authentic. What is rather at stake is an imagined source that could ground a moral imperative that moves a consideration of global justice in the mode of the subjunctive—justice as imagined or wished or only possible—to a mode that takes on the task of global justice as what one ought to be doing, in the mode of an imperative. That is, the name “planet” on Spivak’s terms is a way to name the alterity can be *imagined* as “...a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right” (Spivak *Imperatives* 54-56). The inscription of ‘collective responsibility as right’ imagines suturing the democratic

ideal of rights (and its concomitant goods) to an imperative for collective responsibility.

Spivak argues,

Our life is lived as the call of the wholly other, which must necessarily be answered (in its forgetting, of course, assuming there had been a gift in the first place in the subject's unanticipatable insertion into temporality), by a responsibility bound by accountable reason. Ethics as experience of the impossible—therefore incalculable—is lived as the possible ethical calculus that covers the range between self-interest and responsibility that includes the politico-legal. Justice and law, ethics and politics, gift and responsibility are structureless structures because the first item of each pair is neither available or unavailable. It is in view of justice and ethics as undeconstructible, as experiences of the impossible, that legal and political decisions must be made, empirically scrupulous but philosophically errant. (Even this opposition, of course, is not tenable to the last degree.) The calculus of the second item in each pair such as the ones named above is imperative for responsible action, always in view of this peculiarity. These pairs are not interchangeable, but move on an unconcatenated chain of displacements. In each case, the “and” in the pair opens up the task of acknowledging that the copula “and” is a “supplement” covering an indefinite variety of relationships, since the supplement both supplies a lack and adds an excess. (Spivak *Imperatives* 82-84)

Spivak offers an idea of the subject as always already given over to others as a necessary condition for being a part of a social world. As I discussed in my treatments of Butler and Adorno above, we neither choose our social location nor its implications; this is our “unanticipatable insertion into temporality.” But this does not suggest that we can or even should be entirely given over to each other; a subject with no self-interest is a very difficult subject to imagine, and may no longer be a subject at all. The incalculable, impossible suggestion of an ethical relation is carried out, is “lived,” in the conditioned world. The imperative Spivak seeks to articulate under the name planetarity would have the “undeconstructible” form of justice, ethics and the gift: unavailable, because a

purely just world, for example, is impossible yet available in the mode of the to-come, as something that can be worked toward as a horizon. That is, these oppositions are not binaries in Spivak's view, but ways of schematizing our thinking such that we can posit the possibility of thinking that goes beyond the efficient, instrumental or expedient. Practical global decisions must be made regarding law and commerce: certain wars will be fought, certain aid projects funded. These choices can be considered incomplete or compromised from the perspective of theory, no matter how exigent. Responsible actions that happen in the chain of conditioned events, or in the world that demands practical decisions, rely on facility with law and politics, or as I mentioned above, the ability to manage a complicated life-support system. But it should also be made to bear a relation to the idea to which it is linked in a "structure" that has no preset limits or forms. In other words, what is the relationship between justice and law? We can perhaps say how that question is answered by a certain theory of jurisprudence, or as present in common political rhetorics, but there is no "true" or "natural" relation to be discovered. Instead, the impossible idea and the particular case are joined by an "indefinite variety of relationships." Living life "as the call of the wholly other" for Spivak is an idea aligned with a culture of responsibility and responsibility and accountability as she treats them here are right-based notions. Planetary is a name for alterity she hopes will give force to an attempt to have them supplement each other in a critique of capitalism that could disrupt the harmful effects of globalization.

To this end, she states, "This is where educating into the planetary imperative—assuming and thus effacing an absolute and discontinuous alterity and thus comfortable with an inexhaustible diversity of epistemes—takes its place" (Spivak *Imperatives* 74). On this thinking, learning to learn from below is learning to *mean* to say, "I need to

learn from you what you practice, I need it even if you didn't want to share a bit of my pie; but there's something I want to give you, which will make our shared practice flourish" (Spivak *Imperatives* 78). An imperative to think the planet that is grounded on alterity is the creative, affective, imaginary force that she argues could decenter common affective relations to global dynamics and give way to new relations that flesh out the copula between planet and politics. To "use planetarization to control globalization" would mean to bring "responsibility-thinking pre-capitalist societies" into institutionalized democratic structures in a way that alters the structures, and all of us in them (Spivak *Imperatives* 82).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that Gayatri Spivak's analysis of epistemic discontinuities contributes productively to ethical, social, political critique that seeks to disentangle social intelligibility and social legitimacy, especially in the context of global north and global south dynamics. I have argued here that Spivak's work makes clear how cases of ambiguity, incomprehensibility, or unintelligibility can be produced through the activity of cultural translation. This entails that the emergence of unintelligibility is a diffuse phenomenon, one occurring 'on the side of' both marginalized and marginalizing populations. However, it is also the case that the ability to marshal these discontinuities in the service of one's own interest is mostly held by the globally dominant. Spivak nonetheless argues that education in both global north and global south contexts is a crucial site for critiquing the role of cultural epistemes in global injustices. By condensing a power dynamic into a trope, a figure or a concept-metaphor, she exposes a

cultural logic that can be made available for critique. In the figure of the native informant, for example, Spivak reads the rhetorical and historical obviation of an ethical relation across north-south divides. Although this is an ambivalent position, the native informant as read by Spivak is not a particularly disruptive figure: different enough to count for diversity, but similar enough not to disrupt dominant, mainstream narratives.

In order to shift common north-south relations into the ethical, Spivak advocates that we learn to attend to singularity, so that we can learn to learn from below. Because of this, and because of my own social location in the global north, I have focused more on critically interrogating one form of institutionally mediated life, higher education in the urban metropolis, arguing that cross-disciplinary thinking that is critical of border policing better enables engagement with singularity in theoretical work. The possibility of such cross-disciplinary work is not unrelated to the possibilities of a person who is an academic and his ability to invite new relations. That is, education is interesting for me here because of the dual role an academic animates in a classroom when one is both a scholar and an ethical agent. Attention to ethical singularity might require charting the connections between academic living and working in institutional contexts and the self-conscious voice of a scholar producing an academic text. The method of teleopoietic reading that Spivak argues maintains the relationship between the singular and the general that does not require the subsumption of the particular to the universal. To take on the task of such engagement requires active work on oneself to cultivate openness to surprise both as a producer of theory and in one's engagement with others.

Academic contexts are thus one place where affective stances are developed and reinforced. I argue here that Spivak's pedagogic ideal of a 'non-coercive rearrangement

of desires' is one way to enact an affective scene of education without over-determining it. The idea of planetarity offers a conception of a non-coercive imperative to resist mainstream stances toward the division between the global north and global south. Spivak characterizes the north in terms of a rights-based cultural episteme and the south in terms of a responsibility-based one, arguing that it is extremely difficult to engage the south from a northern context outside of the idiom of benevolence. The north has tended to understand itself as ready to right global wrongs but has remained less likely to rethink what constitutes a desirable strategy for correcting injustices in partner with those positioned in the global south, especially those who might be called subaltern. Planetarity names an ethical motivation for taking up the project of learning to learn from below, one that Spivak hopes will move us from an unquestioned acquiescence to globalization and toward thinking the planet as radical alterity. In *Imperatives to Reimagine the Planet*, Spivak reflects on her project by stating "It cannot be denied that I have been speaking of what may result in persistently critical institutional practice: politico-economic and ideologico-pedagogic accountability" (Spivak *Imperatives* 82). As I have argued here, social, political, ethical critique is most successful when a theorist actively engages with the institutionally mediated conditions of knowledge production. Such a critique must be persistent, since there will never be a fully just institution, or nation, or world. Critical philosophy remains essential to continually reopen the terms upon which we engage the question of justice.



## Ethics and affects: a critique of social intelligibility with Adorno, Butler and Spivak

### Conclusion

I have argued that there is an injustice, or at least something rather like an injustice, to the ways social intelligibility and social legitimacy are entangled. I presented readings of the work of Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak to argue that an affect-attentive critical philosophy is best suited to thinking this interrelation in a way that could support social justice claims. Such a philosophy has three central components: a method for engaging the non-cognitive or not-quite-rational aspects of human experiences that exposes social-political production of epistemic blindspots for critical reflection; an insistence that ethics and questions of power should be thought together; and a commitment to writing affective comportments into a critical project. I have used the work of Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to develop this methodological approach. I was drawn to find a way to engage these thinkers together because I find each of their projects to be inaugurated by pressing social, political and ethical concerns that they explicitly thematize. While their writings are deeply conceptual in nature, they are also constantly traversing what might be called the theory-praxis divide. These thinkers present philosophy that is not shy about its own ethical hopes, political desires and social demands. At the same time, because each of their work is critical in the way I have discussed—as interested in setting out for reconfiguration the terms upon which discourses get sedimented—their methodologies contain an openness that lets them be productively thought together. That is, their philosophical contributions remain auto-critical as they lay out the value-laden presuppositions at work in the constitution of

any critical philosophy. I have thus been able to think them together and gently set them in supplementation to each other. By centralizing the ethical, social and political stakes of their philosophical projects, attending to how each of these thinkers crafts a methodology for engaging ethical, social and political life, I am able to read Adorno, Butler and Spivak together across their methodological and disciplinary differences.

In my readings above, I took up the work of Adorno, Butler and Spivak to find a complex and rich framework for considering the imbrication of legitimacy and intelligibility. Their particular projects are valuable in this regard as each of them displays the deep imbrication of personal possibility with the scenes of ethical, political social life. Their texts display a complex interconnectedness between a person and his world, such that any possibility of something like ethical action, living correctly, or doing right is circumscribed by the limitations of action, meaning, and value embedded in the world. My project follows them in being critical as I maintain that a certain disentanglement is called for: not of the self from the world, in order to “free” the individual from contingency, but rather, to better expose, through critique, the possibility of approaching justice. Attending to the force of the ‘unknowable’ as it bears on the normative constraints on gender non-conformity, or a dialectics of subject and object, or a deconstruction of the figure of the native informant, called me to ask the question of how an ethical force can be part of critical engagement. The sphere of concern I mark as “ethical” allows me to try to think concerns such as the psychic health of individuals as relevant for social-political norms. It lets me try to open up a space of concern or perhaps even care for others. At the very least, it acknowledges the harmful reductions people make in their own lives as complicated attempts to survive and thrive that deserve theoretical attention and are relevant for political analysis. I understand

the philosophies of Adorno, Butler and Spivak to be posing the question of how to ground a critical value, and moving forward with the awareness that one cannot and yet one must. I see this ethical movement at work—one that is not a grounding but instead ungrounds the agent as a premise of ethics—in the assertion of a general condition of precarity, the denunciation of the inhuman, and the appeal to planetarity. That a critical ethical philosophy's claims are necessarily provisional and underway does not ameliorate or shrug off one's ethical accountability, but instead is a responsibly humble response to the indeterminacy at work in the notion of justice to which I have appealed.

Looking at the way ethical and moral concepts are invoked in each of these thinkers allowed me to demonstrate how the interrelation of ethical, social and political critique I am arguing for strengthens critical philosophy. Attention to how these thinkers incorporate an analysis of values into a critical philosophy that is committed to centralizing the exposure of power operations reveals methods for crafting a more productive frame for theoretical work. Here I have pursued the possibility of giving weight to moral concerns in such a way that remains critical about any invocation of the moral. This requires a commitment to troubling the very possibility of something like ethical responsiveness by continually engaging an analysis of social and politically determinate power. I see in the texts I have treated here that the deployment of morality or ethics can work as a call to patience, to slowness, that can be a fruitful space for critique to dwell in. Patience can allow for taking account of trajectories of thought that might not appear immediately, for glimpsing new people as having a stake in a moral consideration, for allowing one's own role in an ethical problem to be reconsidered and rewritten by events unfolding.

I thus contend that any post-enlightenment thinking that engages the concepts of rights and freedom, or liberal notions of education or democracy, should learn through critique that it must track whatever was covered over in the quest for “pure” reason in matters of ethics and politics. This calls for unpacking how affect and reason are set in play together in an argument, account, or claim, without abandoning reason nor granting it full legislating power. As was shown in each of my chapters above, any attempt to critique a normative constraint, or the effects of imperial projects, or a capitalist means of production, or the casualties of a war, or the role of education in the financialization of the globe involves *feeling differently* about the political landscape that engenders violence, and an altered affective relation toward the victims and survivors of violence. Persons are complicated. Our desires are not immediately transparent to ourselves. Our motivations can be mysterious. The webs of connections we find ourselves in can be surprising. We can be terrified of what is most gratifying, drawn again and again to what harms us. Our anger can be swift and misapplied. Our interests can seem downright trivial. To make sense of such complicated beings in an attempt to critique pressing historical concerns, one must engage with human life beyond the dictates of the abstractly rational.

I conclude my argument here by situating the ethical concerns I have treated in terms of a legacy of thinking about feelings that I locate in some approaches to women of color feminisms and queer analyses. While there has been an increasing attention to concerns of gender, race and sexuality in mainstream academic philosophy over the last decade or so, it is certainly the case that there is much work to be done. Queerness, race, gender—perhaps these areas of philosophical engagement have been pushed to the sides of the canonical tradition of philosophy not only because social contexts have been,

and continue to be, fraught with deeply entrenched sexism, racism, and homophobia from which philosophy has had a difficult time disentangling itself, but also because these aspects of lived identities meet in philosophical discourse a deep conceptual intractability. I thus want to gesture to feminist and queer theories that for me mark a rich history for engaging not only with difficult-to-account-for feelings, but the mechanisms that tend to render them opaque to analysis. In situating my concerns in light of the work I discuss below, I indicate the context in which I am thinking my conclusions regarding affect-attentive critical philosophy. This work treats emotions and emotional judgments as ambivalent and multi-faceted, and thereby able to serve as appropriately ambivalent resources for social transformation or social justice. It demonstrates that thinking about emotions calls for accessing everyday experiences, remaining attentive to the every-day immersions in structurally supported violence and to the subtleties of how normative power works. Finally, it shows that staying attentive to the role of emotion in successful argumentation allows for a greater engagement with the rhetorics and logics that inform trenchant, informed critique. In this company I find further ways that a philosophical project can face the peculiar, chaotic, difficult and delightful aspects of persons as part of the work of thinking toward 'justice.'

### Political pains

I begin to frame my analysis of emotions here in terms of the way that pain has been deployed in some feminist critiques. I insist here on the importance of an analysis of pain in part because to reject its invocation would invalidate much of the work produced

under the moniker women of color feminism in the 1970's and 1980's.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the "Preface" to the influential feminist text *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Moraga reminds her readers of Audre Lorde's words, "I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there" (Moraga and Anzaldúa xvi). Reflecting on this call from Lorde, Moraga comments,

Sometimes for me "that deep place of knowledge" Audre refers to seems like an endless reservoir of pain, where I must continually unravel the damage done to me. It is a calculated system of damage, intended to ensure our separation from other women, but particularly those we learned to see as most different from ourselves and therefore, most fearful. The women whose pain we do not want to see as our own. Call it racism, class oppression, men, or dyke-baiting, the system thrives.

I mourn the women whom I have betrayed with my own ignorance, my own fear. (Moraga and Anzaldúa xvi)

Here, we see pain invoked as an essential component of the work being inaugurated by the editors of *This Bridge*. First published in 1981, this anthology of "writings by radical women of color" is concerned with cultivating a radical feminist movement that could be inclusive of the kinds of voices featured in the anthology: activist-theorists interested in the possibilities of living differently in support of movements for social

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<sup>1</sup> This moniker is used, e.g., by Rod Ferguson; Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). His critical analysis of the salience of women of color feminisms' treatment of sexuality is extremely compelling. On my reading, however, his invocation of this group seemed under-defined. In order to mitigate a similarly general invocation, I would like here to put forward the names of some authors I mean to invoke. In addition to Lorde, Moraga, Anzaldúa and Rushin, I'd add The Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and, a bit later, María Lugones. This is not to imply that these authors constitute a cohesive, historical group or community, or that they are exhaustive of the term women of color feminism. This is simply to suggest that these are the thinkers I have in mind when I use this term.

justice (Moraga and Anzaldua xiv). It invokes an identity group, women of color and third world women, not as a “natural affinity group,” but as a *political* group (Moraga, Refugees of a World on Fire: Foreword to the Second Edition). Speaking within and across feminist communities (not necessarily academic communities) the editors of the anthology call attention to the concerns not represented by mainstream feminists, making space to articulate and witness the feelings experienced by women of color, lesbians, and poor women as a result of racism, sexism, and homophobia. In establishing a forum for the pain of these writers to be heard, they hoped to contribute to a movement that is attentive to the interdependencies and the differences of all participants: “white black straight queer female male” (Anzaldúa, Forward to the Second Edition). That is, the authors hope that by cultivating their own specific voices they can contribute to a feminist movement that is made more inclusive by being representative of more particular concerns, rather than interested in supposedly general or universal concerns of a homogenous group called “woman.”<sup>2</sup> As is indicated in the quote from Moraga above, differences of political and social determination often get covered over with anxious emotions, particularly here terror, loathing and fear. The editors of the book call on their readers to consider each of our own roles in the uncritical perpetuation of the hierarchy of social differences, and to recognize the sway of our emotions in our ignorance of each other. Thus, on this analysis, emotions are part of what constitutes and maintains our knowledge of social life.

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<sup>2</sup> The critique of a universalizing tendency within mainstream feminism was waged often during this time period: in short, the general argument seems to be that if the feminist movement only concerned itself with “the problem of woman,” and did not actively confront multiple oppressions, then it would perpetuate racisms and heterosexisms just as readily as mainstream society. While these critics included some white-identified feminists in this critique (e.g. Marilyn Frye), this criticism is nonetheless oft-expressed in feminist writings produced during this time.

The collection is organized under the metaphor of the bridge: the bridge that the authors in the book describe themselves as having to become as a result of their multiple or intersectional identities, as is expressed by Donna Kate Rushin in “This Bridge Poem,”: “I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister/My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists/The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks/To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the/Black separatists to the artist the artists to my friends’ parents/ Then/I’ve got to explain myself/To everybody” (Rushin xxi). This poem expresses a depletion of energy, a feeling of being drained, and also an isolation that is exacerbated by being continually interpolated as a translator of other people’s concerns as well as one’s own. Rushin described herself as having individual connections to all of the kinds of people listed above, as well as being “the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people,” indicating that the labor of social interactions across differences is being consolidated on individuals who have little hope of fomenting greater structural changes that would perhaps cause these concerns to be more widely distributed. Instead, such individuals often just get worn-out and exasperated by the ethical burden of *being* ‘the problem of race.’ The worry Rushin highlights here is seconded by Gloria Anzaldúa; she describes herself as tired of dealing with the suffering of being oppressed, marginalized, othered, of constantly experiencing and representing her life as tragic. Despite and because of that fatigue, *This Bridge* commits itself to the work of remaining an active challenge to a feminist movement or a left politics that isn’t attentive to the particularities of women of color. I suggest here that a critical analysis of emotional life suggests that being tired of talking about one’s socially oppressed identity is not simply



a symptom, it is rather part of the structuring power of a historical-social world.

Further, Moraga reminds her readers,

Change does not occur in a vacuum. In this preface [to the Second Edition of *This Bridge*] I have tried to recreate for you my own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color. I want to reflect in actual terms how this anthology and the women in it and around it have personally transformed my life, sometimes rather painfully but always with richness and meaning. (Moraga and Anzaldua xiii)

If one seeks to critique and resist structural inequalities, the work of doing so requires growth and transformation which are not always a pleasant experience. Overall, the invocation of emotion in *This Bridge* is quite complex: here, pain is not only the negative weight on a theory of justice, pain also attends transformation: a transformation in thinking, in conceptualization, is not an affectively neutral event. The idea of the ‘personal transformation in consciousness’ which was often invoked during this moment in feminism’s tradition preserves an affectively explicit relationship between the theorist, the reader, and the ideas of the texts. These works highlight the emotional dimension of thinking differently, recognizing that being uncomfortable, hurt, intimidated, frightened; being excited, giddy, mesmerized; feeling vulnerable, feeling tired—these are part of the learning and unlearning necessary to seriously engage critique. This is what is at stake in the “politicization” described by Moraga.

Audre Lorde, the poet and author referenced above by Moraga and a contributor to *This Bridge*, also explores the importance of feelings for feminist work in her collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider*. In the essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,”

Lorde comments on the role of different kinds of thinking in promoting social change. On Lorde's analysis, there are many different ways that we can relate to ourselves through self-reflection, each producing different possibilities. Poetry is what she names that self relation, or mode of thinking, that uses emotional experiences to produce new, radical ideas for living differently. She notes "As they become known to us and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas" (Lorde 37). She goes on to maintain, "For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men" (Lorde 39). The juxtaposition of idea and feeling here is part of a sustained critique in *Sister Outsider* of the devaluation of emotions embedded in certain social orders. Lorde's critique, while possibly appearing as essentializing for black female experience, can rather be read as a critical contribution to thinking The U.S.'s social-political worlds. Lorde conceptualizes society here as an interrelation of capitalist values and gendered social norms, and invokes the kind of gendered and raced hierarchization of values that has often been cited as supporting patriarchal, white supremacist social orders. Her conceptualization of Arguing that feeling has had to subordinate itself to reason under these exploitative social orders, she points out that they have not been eradicated; and what has been outlawed can be a potent ground for contesting and resisting oppressive laws. If feeling one way helps to shore up one kind of moral vision, what happens when you feel differently?

Public feelings

The work begun in early feminist critique which considered how emotion interweaves with judgments about social, political, ethical life has crucial connections to more recent work produced in Queer Theory. For instance, Ann Cvetkovich has suggested that affect is a theoretical site of analysis that helps articulate a broader frame or context for the consideration of what kinds of emotional experiences deserve theoretical (social, political, ethical) attention. As described in her essay “Public Feelings,”<sup>3</sup> named after a political group she is a part of, their work is part of an effort to “...critique liberal forms of affect and, moreover, to think about liberalism and neoliberalism in affective terms—to take on the vocabularies of tolerance, diversity, and multiculturalism as connected to certain affects or structures of feeling that are inadequate to, or that too conveniently package and manage, the messy legacies of history (Cvetkovich 465). Here, Cvetkovich names many of the terms under which “thinking difference” occurs in contemporary U.S. social life as having embedded emotional and normative assumptions that gloss over engaged historical thinking. This suggests that thinking more everyday experiences is not counter-productive to thinking structural oppressions. Cvetkovich sets up her own approach to affect over and against an approach to “trauma theory” that she characterizes as attending to the grandiose at the expense of queer experiences, which are then rendered “tangential.” On her analysis, focusing on monumental historical events, while important, creates a narrow scope that limits the possibility of making connections across oppressions. She argues that focusing on “the everyday and

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<sup>3</sup> The Public Feelings group, according to Cvetkovich, is an interdisciplinary group of people, including academics, activists and artists, who are engaged in thinking through the “the role of feelings in public life.” It includes a collection of people who have met both formally and informally, at the national and local level, since 2001.

the insidious rather than the catastrophic” helps “draw attention to how structural forms of violence are so frequently lived, how their invisibility or normalization is another part of their oppressiveness” (Cvetkovich 464). As I suggested in my reading of Adorno above, what is at issue is not to dismiss theories that think about political traumas or monumentalized events such as Auschwitz, but to open up a frame for considering what falls through the cracks when certain historical events are taken as formative traumas, and how to consider the social-political significance of those experiences not previously accounted for.

Further, what is significant about the framing of Cvetkovich’s work is that it considers the broader significance of projects that have taken up and been named for certain social identities, such as Feminism and Queer Theory. As with the thinkers engaged above in my discussion of *This Bridge Called My Back*, appealing to the insights of these discourses is not confined to interrogating the question of “women” or even gender or sexuality. The work that happens under this rubric is seen to have significance for the approach to taking up social-political questions more broadly construed, while calling for the retention of a commitment to the specificity of thinking that allowed for the consideration of “women” in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Cvetkovich credits Queer Theory with articulating “...a more expansive definition of political life...that political identities are implicit within structures of feeling, sensibilities, everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation that may not take the form of recognizable organizations or institutions” (Cvetkovich 461). This point is corroborated by the work of Lauren Berlant, who is careful to point out that the “everyday” should not be set up as the “real” place of life. However, she agrees that what gets called everyday experience is

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<sup>4</sup> This aligns with the movement of my reading of Judith Butler’s work above.

a space that merits critical attention. An engagement with Berlant's project in *The Female Complaint* reveals that a kind of critical suspicion—or even a cynicism—regarding the role of emotions in social-political life need not re-banish the emotional to the realm of reason's other, since, as I have argued, affect is part of the work of forming political judgments. *The Female Complaint* seeks to plot “the emergence and conventions of the first mass cultural intimate public in the United States” which for Berlant is the public that consumes “women's fiction” (Berlant viii). She engages popular literary and cinematic texts that “foreground witnessing and explaining women's disappointment in the tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy,” in order to argue that there exists a strange kind of almost-political mass culture that is formed by the consumption of popular fiction (Berlant 1). What is significant to my discussion here is not the express literary findings of Berlant's work, but how this work can contribute to critiques of normative life under the auspices of the broader political context referred to above. Her project is motivated by “a desire to understand what keeps people attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in their personal and political lives;” and the analysis of the kinds of negotiations and coping mechanisms with normativity that she investigates in her book suggests that they can serve the continuation of the status quo through the manipulation of affect. Yet, Berlant's articulation of normativity as the feeling or affect of ‘belonging’ opens up thinking about the role of emotions in the reproduction of the material conditions of ethical, social, political life. She states,

...when people talk about sexual normativity they are often imagining a describable way of life and presuming that an attachment to it amounts to some version of a will to privilege, if not power. But I see normativity not only as a disciplinary operation on how people imagine the good life, but as an aspiration people have for an unshearable suturing to their

social world, and as an aspiration it is an affect, a sense of something, organized by but not inhering in its conventional objects. (Berlant 266)

Berlant is not denying that sexual normativity has power due to its role as a gatekeeper for social privileges, but she points out that this does not exhaust how normativity works. She highlights the emotional desires that cause people to seek belonging, noting a strange temporality in this desire—the possibility of being satisfied by an emotional state one has not achieved, because one thinks it has simply not been achieved *yet*. She goes on to state that, “The political question [at stake in this analysis of normativity] is how to understand the difficulty of detaching from lives and worlds that wear out life, rather than sustain it” (Berlant 266). That Berlant names this both an emotional and political question links this approach to the feminism I discussed above. Perhaps what is called for is to think together these approaches to gender, sexuality, race and oppression, communicated here through the ciphers of a kind of ‘old-school’ feminist’s political sincerity and a ‘new-school’ queer theorist’s tendency toward cynicism. As I have been arguing, emotions or affects play a part in constituting the values that allow some people to appear as legitimate, and others not, as reason and emotion intertwine in the constitution of social-political value and worth and it is important to trouble the easy separation of the two.

### Sticky affects

In light of the intellectual history I lay out above, the question should not be *whether* to invoke emotion in of ethical, social, political critique, but *how*. In thinking this question,

I follow Sara Ahmed to suggest that in order to more clearly understand the deployment of emotions in ethical, social and political normativity, emotion can be conceived of in philosophical analysis not as something one possesses, or as an attribute that belongs to a subject, but in terms of affective economies.<sup>5</sup> This enables critique that conceives of representations of suffering as objects that circulate in economies of social-political life, thus suggesting a way in which emotions might be more forcefully deployed in critical analysis. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed maintains that emotional states, while certainly personal, are nonetheless not *immediate*, and thus must be interpreted; on this analysis, emotion is always channeled and directed by historical social relations. The question of her text is not *what are emotions*, but rather, *what do emotions do*; this allows her to track the ways in which “we” emotionally constitute “others” in ethical, social, political life. She describes her project by stating, “I explore how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies. Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others. My analysis proceeds by reading texts that circulate in the public domain, which work by aligning subjects with collectives by attributing ‘others’ as the ‘source’ of our feelings” (Ahmed *Emotion* 1). For Ahmed, it is not the case that preformed, self-contained subjects “have”

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmed primarily uses the term *emotion* in this text, but in this work and in her more recent *The Promise of Happiness* she also uses the language of *affect*. She seems to favor *emotion* because she wishes to explore how states such as hate, disgust or fear help to shape salient social-political distinctions that are at work in the world. However, in tension with Brian Massumi, Ahmed maintains that one should not over-emphasize the distinction between emotion and affect. She explains in *The Promise of Happiness* that Massumi argues *emotion* describes affect that has been named and channeled into meaning by a subject, leaving affect as that which cannot be described or qualified. Ahmed stresses the social character of both emotion and affect, and distinguishes her analysis from that of Massumi precisely in avoiding positing an “autonomous” power for affect, apart from historical, social-political relations. It is thus for methodological purposes that Ahmed will draw on both of these terms, and not posit a hard and fast analytical distinction between them

feelings about others and objects, but rather the work of emotions helps to maintain the very borders between subjects and objects in the first place, and to subtend the seemingly objective surfaces that structure the boundaries of the material world. Ahmed demonstrates throughout her analysis of social-political texts that much public discourse seeks to support an elevation of reason over emotion or a civilizing, developmental hierarchy of emotions, through the invocation of concealed and disguised emotively charged language, or signs (Ahmed *Emotion* 2-3). To contest that work of concealment, she tracks the ways in which signs *circulate* through social life. A sign on this thinking is a word or phrase that is present in various places in a social-political contexts: spoken on TV, read in the newspaper, used in conversation. These signs aggregate some emotional attachments, disavow others, and *change* through their circulation.

Rather than suggesting that emotions are caused by objects, or that emotions are simply personal judgments, Ahmed, following a reading of David Hume, uses the analytical category of *impression* to describe the feelings that are generated by contact with objects (Ahmed *Emotion* 6).<sup>6</sup> Forming an impression for Ahmed encompasses the relations usually associated under the categories perception, cognition and emotion, leading to a more flexible category for describing the effects we have upon each other: interacting with objects forms an impression in the subject, but also, we leave others with an impression of ourselves, and one can make an impression on a gathering of

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<sup>6</sup> Hume distinguishes between a thought or idea and an impression by appealing to sense experience, arguing that impressions are experienced as more “forcible and lively” the ideas which have no empirical referent. Impressions for Hume are “all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will” David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 10..



people, an academic field, or a political world. In her words, she uses the term *impression* in order to “avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be ‘experienced’ as distinct realms of human ‘experience’ (Ahmed *Emotion* 6). By beginning with the interweaving of sensory information, the feelings one has about them, and the judgments one forms, rather than trying to simplify impressions by analytically separating them, she tries to do more justice to the experience of emotional states. She focuses on emotion understood in this more complicated sense as the project of the book concerns the questions of how subjects become invested in social norms, and her work is influenced by scholarship that has interrogated the role of emotion in the maintenance of normativity, noting “[f]eminist and queer scholars have shown us that emotions ‘matter’ for politics; emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well worlds” (Ahmed *Emotion* 12).

Ahmed follows Judith Butler, for example, in arguing that seemingly stable norms of social life, particularly those that maintain the order and stability of social relations, are continually maintained through concealed performativity (Ahmed *Emotion* 12). Ahmed insists that emotional impressions, and the objects which inaugurate them, are an integral, constitutive aspect of the work of maintaining social normativity, suggesting that the interrogation of emotion is necessary to unsettling restrictive and damaging norms. This is the case as, for Ahmed, emotions are associated with “‘signs’ and how they work on and in relation to bodies” (Ahmed *Emotion* 194). Emotion here is part of the work of constituting meaning, rather than that which represents or describes simply the qualities of objects or subjective experiences. As was already noted above, Ahmed contends that emotions help constitute both “subjects” and “objects,” by being integral

to the positing and maintaining of all kinds of boundaries, particularly those that distinguish between “us” and “them,” or “myself” and “others.” In her words,

In suggesting that emotions create the very effect of an inside and an outside, I am not then claiming that emotions are psychological *and* social, individual *and* collective. My model refuses the abbreviation of the ‘and.’ Rather, I suggest that emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects, a process which suggests that the ‘objectivity’ of the psychic and social is an effect rather than a cause.  
(Ahmed *Emotion* 10)

The temporality of Ahmed’s analysis here is crucial: asking the question of what emotions do calls attention to the way that emotions work in the background of judgments, helping to shape the very parameters in which any “thought” can occur. In maintaining that her model of the sociality of emotions “refuses the abbreviation of the ‘and,’” Ahmed calls for not an adjustment to, but a break in the frame which would conceive of emotions as the property of a subject. If an emotional demarcation of meaning has already taken place before one could pose a question about ethical, social, political life, then the frame in which we consider emotions must interrogate the way they help pre-constitute the meanings and values that condition the appearance of the “objective” world in which any critique could be posited.

To this end, Ahmed wants to consider how signs that circulate through social life become “saturated with affect” (Ahmed *Emotion* 194-95). Ahmed uses the term “sticky” to describe those signs that have become sites for the aggregation of emotions, indicating that signs become sticky through repetition in social-political life and through their relation to other signs. Notable examples of this kind of language are ethnic or racial slurs, and the use of “the N word” and “the B word” to stand in for

language deemed inappropriate testifies to how the emotive power of these associations at times transcends even the utterance of the sign. But more often, words themselves circulate as signs with a plausible deniability as to the chains of association that attend the sign. The example that Ahmed invokes in her explanation of sticky signs is the word *Paki*, a derogatory term for South Asians that tends to be used in the U.K. As she notes,

To use a sticky sign is to evoke other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association. The word ‘Paki’ might then stick to other words that are not spoken: immigrant, outsider, dirty, and so on. The association between words that generates meanings is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allow such signs to accumulate value*. I am describing this accumulation of affective value as a form of stickiness, or as ‘sticky signs’. (Ahmed *Emotion* 92)

On this example, the word *Paki* carries with it associations with the emotionally coded terms of outsider, dirty, etc., which have come to stick to it through its history of usage. Even if that history is not avowed by the speaker, it attends the utterance of the term. Ostensibly, in strictly connotative terms, the word *Paki* means people who are Pakistani. Or, a bit more broadly, people who apparently look as if they are Pakistani. The *value* of the sign, however, is designated through its concealed emotional impressions; the work of the sign is the work of coding those it covers with affectively negative values<sup>7</sup>. To offer an account of such a concealed chain of association, to explain

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<sup>7</sup> By negative here, I mean undesirable from the perspective of the dominant affective economy. What gets construed as negative in this sense is part of historical power relations, and critique is often most strong when it contests the way in which the so-called negative is construed and maintained, or resuscitates the negative for redeployment, in favor of different ends. See for example Ahmed’s most recent work,

the stickiness of the sign, is thus a powerful tool in contesting exploitative or oppressive narratives, as such critique reveals that the sticky sign had been generating unspecified emotional reactions.

As I've indicated here, *affect* for Ahmed is what accrues when meaning is produced across social-political interaction; because emotion is social in character, a feeling on her analysis, is produced, intensified, and circulates within an affective economy. She argues that in affective economies, the objects of emotions circulate, not emotions themselves (Ahmed *Emotion* 11). This point is crucial, as stressing the sociality of emotions does not move her to understand emotion to operate on a contagion model—affects aren't objects, and they cannot be presumed to simply pass from one to another. Rather, the objects of emotion "...become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (Ahmed *Emotion* 11). To substantiate this, Ahmed provides a reading of how objects of fear circulate in social-political life, drawing on a reading of both Psychoanalytic and Marxian theories. From Freud's "The Unconscious," Ahmed takes the idea that feelings can be at work on and in subjects while simultaneously remaining unconscious. She argues, following Freud, that

Psychoanalysis allows us to see that emotions such as hate involve a process of movement or association, *whereby 'feelings' take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present.* This is what I call the 'rippling' effect of emotions; they move sideways (through 'sticky' associations between signs, figures and objects) as well as forwards and backwards (repression always leaves its trace in the present—hence 'what sticks' is bound up with the 'absent presence' of historicity). (Ahmed *Emotion* 44–5)

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*The Promise of Happiness*, in which she redeploys the alleged negativity of the feminist kill-joy Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Ahmed distinguishes her work from classic psychoanalytic analysis is that she resists regarding these affective economies as simply psychic, which to her would suggest that these economies of meaning derive from subjectivity, or as propping up any one naturalized or presumed-universal model of the subject. However, psychoanalytic theories of the role of repression in consciousness are crucial in allowing her to explore how ideas do not have to be consciously present to leave a trace of the emotional associations of those ideas. A word such as *Paki* or *illegals* can carry with it hate for something deemed inferior, a fear that scarce resources will grow scarcer, desire for a presumed exotic other, anxiety for having to accommodate differences of culture or values, or, and probably most likely, a combination of such feelings, whose root is not easily ascertained and whose meaning is not easily understood. An explanation for the prevalence of such confusion can be found in the way that complex consciousnesses can form emotional associations. Movement and association are linked in Ahmed's analysis to indicate that the way in which emotions form the stickiness of signs is a dynamic, social function.

Further, the temporal structure of an "absent presence" of historicity indicates that past associations can easily haunt present impressions. Because the complex layering of emotional impressions on signs involves both individual experiences and social discourses, and the sedimentation of meaning happens over time, much of what is directing the impression of a sign is occluded from view. Ahmed combines her reading of Freud with a reading of Marx to continue her argument:

Indeed, insofar as psychoanalysis is a theory of the subject as lacking in the present, it offers a theory of emotion as economy, *as involving relationships of difference and displacement without positive value*. That is,

emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation. I am using ‘the economic’ to suggest that objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as a psychic field, borrowing from the Marxian critique of the logic of capital. (Ahmed *Emotion* 45).

Ahmed is indicating that emotional states do not represent inherent or natural reactions to the objective or positive values of objects or encounters. Instead, by thinking on the model of capital, she is able to conceive of how interrelated social worlds each affect the layering of meaning onto a sign such as *Paki*. Personal histories, political speeches, 24-hour news reporting, academic experts, their critics and supporters, along with a whole host of other layers of signification condition the impressions these terms leave in their wake. Ahmed’s illusion or “limited analogy” to Marx’s critique of capital allow her to argue that the fields through which emotions circulate must be thought as “social and material, as well as psychic” (Ahmed *Emotion* 46). Just as, for Marx, the conversion of money to capital to money engenders surplus value through the circulation and exchange of money, Ahmed argues that the movement of signs through affective economies engenders affect on the model of surplus-value. The affective value of signs is an effect of their circulation, and the more signs circulate, the stronger their affective value becomes.

#### The affect of the I-word

A sign that is currently being interrogated as to its hidden accumulated value in the U.S. is the term “illegals,” which is ostensibly short for “illegal immigrant.” A campaign is currently underway by the on-line news source *Colorlines* to eradicate the term

“illegals” from use in U.S. public conversations. *Colorlines* argues in its “Drop the I-Word campaign” that Americans should stop using the word *illegal* as a sign for those people who reside or work in the U.S. but whose presence here is undocumented by the U.S. government. On their view, using “the I-word” works to create a class of people whose ethical status is lower than those who rally around its use. In this way, use of the term supports the dehumanization of undocumented immigrants. *Colorlines* maintains that “The discriminatory message [of the “I-word”] is not explicit, but hidden, or racially coded” (*Colorlines*). Their rhetorical analysis tries to help makes sense of what affects stick to this sign. They argue that the term groups together under a *threatening* sign a large group of people whose immigration statuses depend on particular circumstances, which are elided when the sign is used.<sup>8</sup> What’s more, *illegals* carries with it a racial meaning: although it is supposed to represent a legal status, in practice it is infrequently associated with white immigrants, and most often is associated with Mexican immigrants, and people who are read as Mexican immigrants.

*Colorlines* argues that, politically, use of this term is part of certain explicit anti-immigration strategies, stating, “We have to look at the framework from which the term emerges and how it has thrived. The term has been made popular in the media by a web of people and organizations that have been successful in halting reasoned and informed debate about immigration” (*Colorlines*). This claim is supported by the Anti-

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<sup>8</sup> According to *Colorlines*, this group includes people who are brought to the country against their will; who are brought by employers and often exploited for cheap labor; who fall out of status and overstay their VISAS for a variety of reasons; people who risk being killed in their country of origin, are refugees due to bad economic policies such as NAFTA, are affected by natural disasters and/or other reasons beyond their control, and who are forced by economics and/or politics to risk everything simply to provide for their families *Colorlines*, *Drop the I-Word*, 2010, ARC, Available: <http://colorlines.com/droptheiword/>, 01/17/2011 2011.

Defamation League, who argue in their 2008 report *Immigrants Targeted: Extremist Rhetoric Moves into the Mainstream* that there is a growing number of anti-immigration groups and coalitions who, unlike explicit hate groups, “...often use more subtle language to demonize immigrants and foreigners. They are frequently quoted in the media, have been called to testify before Congress, and often hold meetings with lawmakers and other public figures” (League *ADL Immigration Report 1*). Yet these coalitions are documented by the ADL as drawing on the same value-laden language that hate groups do. Tactics used by the coalitions exposed in the ADL report include characterizing immigrants as “hordes that swarm over the border;” as disease-infested; as murderers, rapists, and terrorists; and as perpetrating secret plots to annex parts of the U.S for foreign territories” (League *ADL Immigration Report 2*). The ADL thus supports *Colorlines*’ analysis that the word *illegal* carries with it implied associations of dirty and unclean threats to “us” U.S. citizens. Mónica Novoa of *Colorlines* further points out that, “Dehumanizing language has dangerous consequences and plays a central role not only in legitimating racial profiling, but in creating a hateful environment that breeds violence. The use of the i-word and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the media has risen throughout the last decade. In that same time, we have also seen a rise in hate crimes against Latinos. According to the FBI, from 2003 to 2007, hate crimes against Latinos rose by nearly 40 percent” (Novoa). The FBI’s “Hate Crimes Statistics” report for 2009 reported that of the 1,109 reported victims of hate crimes motivated by the offender’s bias toward a particular ethnicity or national origin, 62.4 percent of the victims were targeted because of an anti-Hispanic bias (FBI)<sup>9</sup>. While this

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that this FBI report is a federal compilation of local crimes which have to be self-reported by local officials, whose participation is voluntary. Thus number is thus likely a low estimate, especially since “more than 60 U.S. cities with



is not an overwhelming argument that use of the sign *illegals causes* violence against immigrants, the FBI Hate Crimes report at least spells out some of the stakes for Mexican immigrants—and people who “look like” Mexican immigrants—if they continue to be dehumanized in U.S. public discourse. This example of the use of *illegals* in current public conversations thus bears out Ahmed’s claim that language is “a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together, by the way they move us” (Ahmed *Emotion* 194–95). Here, the figure of the terrorist, the rapist, and the disease-carrier get attached to the sign *illegal*, and using it slides the potential “victims” of these threats into one group, and the imagined perpetrators of them into another. Fear, anxiety, and resentment help to solidify the borders of those groups.

As I have suggested here, the *value* of a sticky sign is thus designated through its concealed affect. When deployed in the context of the naming of an immigrant population by a group that considers itself native, the work of the sign is the work of coding those it signifies with affectively negative values. This example gestures to how various aspects of social identity—race, ethnicity, class, and nationality—can interweave in a sticky sign, and help to frame the way that people appear to each other in social-political life. To offer an account of such concealed associations, to demonstrate the stickiness of the sign, is thus a powerful tool for helping craft an affectively attentive critical philosophy: this concept helps in contesting narratives that work through othering and trying to resist their politically marginalizing effects. By

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100,000-plus populations still did not participate in the annual study” Anti-Defamation League, ADL Welcomes Drop in FBI Hate Crime Numbers; Disappointed at Failure of Large Cities to Participate 2010, ADL, Available: [http://www.adl.org/PresRele/HatCr\\_51/5919\\_51.htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/HatCr_51/5919_51.htm), 01/17/2011 2011..

exposing the field in which social-political judgments are made as affectively invested with sticky signs, one helps set the conditions for ethical responsiveness. Here, that might take the form of being more able to understand a claim that would not have initially been one's own.

#### In conclusion

I have reflected here on potential for mobilizing affect in philosophical critique, situating my interest in critical affects within other feminist and queer analysis. In my reading of Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, I showed that emotion can be understood not as something one possesses, or as an attribute that belongs to a subject, but in terms of affective economies. Critique as I use it here is a kind of undoing, in thought, of sedimented structures. If it is already presumed that affect is part of the constitution of social-political meaning, and if a framework for confronting common blockages and impasses can be mobilized, then hopefully different perspectives can be brought to bear on the entrenched emotional divides that affect social possibilities. I am thinking specifically of the impasses that appear increasingly polarizing as part of the U.S. "culture wars." I suggest that the affect-attentive critical philosophy I've been advocating for can help reconfigure the political problems that need addressing, particularly around the tired political frameworks that reappear in the dominant idioms and caricatures of mainstream liberal and conservative politics. What is "right" in any impasse will always be contested and contextual. I suggest here that the task is to reconfigure the terms on which values are confronted so that the thinking about affect and 'justice' turns back on the self. Any critique of the implication of another in a racist

discourse also implies the question of how to hear from another if she claims that one is similarly implicated. I have argued here that ethical, social, political philosophy must resist prescribing in advance the proper or correct ethical actions in favor of articulating the conditions under which a nuanced critique could occur, one attentive to the concerns of social context and power operations. This applies also to the one who theorizes. Thinking through the affects that attend political sensibilities and understanding them as socially constituted judgments reconfigures these impasses so that affectively different readings of social life can flourish.

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